

# HIGHLAND MARY



CLAYTON  
MACKENZIE  
LEGGE





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**HIGHLAND MARY**













“Highland Mary.”



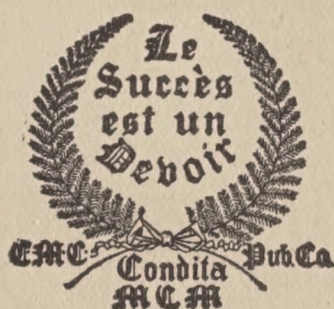
# HIGHLAND <sup>Town</sup> MARY

The Romance of a Poet

A  
NOVEL

By  
CLAYTON MACKENZIE LEGGE

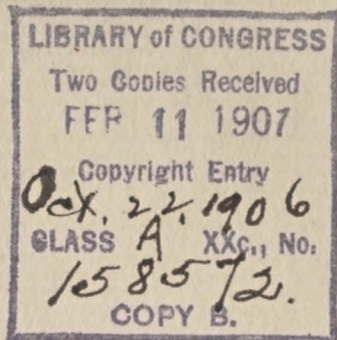
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1906

C. M. CLARK PUBLISHING CO.  
BOSTON





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Boston, Mass.

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TO

THE REV. DR. DONALD SAGE MACKAY, D.D.,

*Pastor of the Collegiate Church,*

NEW YORK CITY.

I RESPECTFULLY DEDICATE THIS BOOK







## FOREWORD

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With apologies to Dame History for having taken liberties with some of her famous characters, I would ask the Reader to remember that this story is fiction and not history.

I have made use of some of the most romantic episodes in the life of Robert Burns, such as his courtship of Mary Campbell and his love affair with Jean Armour, “the Belle of Mauchline,” and many of the historical references and details are authentic.

But my chief purpose in using these incidents was to make “Highland Mary” as picturesque, lovable and interesting a character in Fiction as she has always been in the History of Scotland.

CLAYTON MACKENZIE LEGGE.







# HIGHLAND MARY

## CHAPTER I

IN the "but" or living-room (as it was termed in Scotland) of a little whitewashed thatched cottage near Auld Ayr in the land of the Doon, sat a quiet, sedate trio of persons consisting of two men and a woman. She who sat at the wheel busily engaged in spinning was the mistress of the cot, a matronly, middle-aged woman in peasant's cap and 'kerchief.

The other two occupants of the room for years had been inseparable companions and cronies, and when not at the village inn could be found sitting by the fireside of one of their neighbors, smoking their pipes in blissful laziness. And all Ayrshire tolerated and even welcomed Tam O'Shanter and his cronie, "Souter Johnny."

Tam was an Ayrshire farmer, considered fairly well-to-do in the neighborhood, while Souter (shoemaker) Johnny was the village cobbler, who seldom, if ever, worked at his trade nowadays. All the afternoon had they sat by the open fireplace, with its roomy, projecting chimney, watching the peat burn, seldom speaking, smoking their old smelly pipes, and sighing contentedly as the warmth penetrated their old bones.



Mrs. Burns glanced at her uninvited guests occasionally with no approving eye. If they must inflict their presence on her, why couldn't they talk, say something, tell her some of the news, the gossip of the village? she thought angrily; their everlasting silence had grown very monotonous to the good dame. She wished they would go. It was nearing supper time, and Gilbert would soon be in from the field, and she knew that he did not approve of the two old cronies hanging around monopolizing the fireplace to the exclusion of everyone else, and she did not want any hard words between them and Gilbert. Suddenly with a final whirl she fastened the end of the yarn she was spinning, and getting up from her seat set the wheel back against the whitewashed wall.

Then going to the old deal dresser, she took from one of the drawers a white cloth and spread it smoothly over the table, then from the rack, which hung above it, she took the old blue dishes and quickly set the table for their evening meal. At these preparations for supper the old cronies looked eagerly expectant, for none knew better than they the excellence of the Widow Burns' cooking, and a look of pleasant anticipation stole over their sober faces as they perceived the platter of scones on the table ready to be placed on the hot slab of stone in the fireplace.

Knocking the ashes from his pipe, Tam rose unsteadily to his feet, and standing with his back



to the fire, he admiringly watched the widow as she bustled to and fro from table to dresser. "Ah, Mistress Burns, ye're a fine housekeeper," he remarked admiringly. "An' ye're a fine cook."

Mrs. Burns turned on him sharply. "So is your guidwife," she said shortly, glancing out through the low, deep, square window to where her second son could be seen crossing the field to the house. She hoped he would take the hint and go.

"Aye, Mistress, I ken ye're recht," replied Tam, meekly, with a dismal sigh. "But it's a sorry bet o' supper I'll be gang hame to this night, an' ye ken it's a long journey, too, Mistress Burns," he insinuated slyly.

"Sure it's a lang, weary journey, Tam," said Souther Johnny, commiseratingly. "But think o' the warm welcome ye'll be haein' when ye meet your guidwife at the door," and a malicious twinkle gleamed in his kindly but keen old eyes.

"How is your guidwife, Tam O'Shanter?" inquired Mistress Burns, as she placed some scones on the hot hearthstone to bake.

"She's a maist unco woman, Mistress," replied Tam sorrowfully. "There's no livin' wi' her o' late. She's no a help or comfort to a mon at a'!" he whined. Here Tam got a delicious whiff of the baking scones, and his mouth as well as his eyes watered as he continued pathetically, "If she could only cook like ye, Mistress. Oh, 'twas a sorry day for



Tam O'Shanter when he took such a scoldin' beldame for wife," and Tam sat down, the picture of abject distress.

Souter regarded his cronie with a grim smile. He had no pity for Tam, nor for any man, in fact, who would not or could not rule his own household. (Souter, by the by, had remained a bachelor.) However, he did his best to console Tam whenever his marital troubles were discussed.

"Never mind, Tam," he said sympathetically, helping himself to a scone while Mistress Burns' back was turned. "Ye ken where ye can find all the comfort and consolation ye can hold, if ye hae the tip-pence."

Tam wiped away a tear (tears came easily to the old tyke in his constant state of semi-intoxication) and gave a deep, prolonged sigh. "Aye, Souter, an' I feel mair at home in the Inn than I do with my guidwife," he answered mournfully. "I dinna mind telling ye, she's driven me to the Deil himsel', by her daur looks an' ways. The only friend I hae left is Old John Barleycorn," and he wailed in maudlin despair.

"He's your best enemy, ye mean," retorted Souter dryly, relighting his pipe, after having demolished, with evident relish, the last of his stolen scone.

"Waesucks, mon," he continued, assuming the tone of Dominie Daddy Auld, who had tried in vain to convert the two old sinners, much to their amusement and inward elation. "Your guidwife told ye



weel. Ye're a skellum, Tam, a blethering, blustering, drunken blellum," and the old rogue looked slyly at Mistress Burns to note the effect of his harangue.

"Aye, ye're right, Souter Johnny," said the good dame, nodding approval to him, and going up to Tam, who was still sitting groaning by the fireside, she shook him vigorously by the shoulder. "Stop your groaning and grunting, ye old tyke, and listen to me," she said sharply. "Take your friend's advice and gi' old John Barleycorn a wide berth." Here her voice dropped to a whisper, "or some day ye'll be caught wi' warlocks in the mire, Tam O'Shanter." He stopped his noise and straightened up in his chair.

"Aye, and ghosties and witches will come yelpin' after ye as ye pass the auld haunted kirk at Alloway," added Souter sepulchrally, leaning over Tam with fixed eyes and hand outstretched, clutching spasmodically at imaginary objects floating before Tam's suspicious, angry eyes. Tam, however, was not to be so easily frightened, and brushing Souter aside, he jumped to his feet. "Souter Johnny, dinna ye preach to me, mon," he roared menacingly. "Ye hae no reght. Let Daddy Auld do that! I dinna fear the witches or ghosties, not I." He staggered to the window and pointed to an old white horse standing meekly by the roadside.

"Do ye see any auld faithful Maggie standin' out there?" he cried triumphantly. Not waiting for



their answer, he continued proudly, "Nae witches can catch Tam O'Shanter when he's astride his auld mare's back, whether he is drunk or sober," and he glared defiantly at his listeners. At that moment the door from the "ben" opened, and Gilbert Burns entered the room. An angry frown wrinkled his forehead as his gaze fell upon the two old cronies. A hard worker himself, he could not abide laziness or shiftlessness in another. He strode swiftly up to Tam, who had suddenly lost his defiant attitude, but before he could speak the bitter, impatient words which rushed to his lips, his mother, knowing his uncertain temper, shook her head at him remonstratingly. "Ah, lad, I'm fair ye hae come in to rest a while, an' to hae a bit o' supper," she hurriedly said. "Set ye doon. I hae some scones for ye, an' Mollie has some rabbit stew. Noo gie me your bonnet and coat, laddie," and taking them from him she hung them on the peg behind the door, while Gilbert with a look of disgust at the two old cronies sat down and proceeded to butter his scones in moody silence. Tam and Sou-ter, however, did not appear in any wise abashed, and perceiving they were not to be invited to eat with Gilbert, they resumed their seats each side of the fireplace and heaved a disconsolate sigh.

Mrs. Burns, who had left the room for a moment, now entered bearing a large bowl of the steaming stew, which she set before her son, while directly after her appeared old Mollie Dunn, the half-witted house-



hold drudge. The time was when Mollie had been the swiftest mail carrier between Dumfries and Mauchline, but she was now content to have a home with the Burns family, where, if the twinges of rheumatism assailed her, she could rest her bones until relief came. She now stood, a pleased grin on her ugly face, watching Gilbert as he helped himself to a generous portion of the stew which she had proudly prepared for the evening meal.

“Molly,” said her mistress sharply, “dinna ye stand there idle; fetch me some hot water frae the pot.”

Molly got a pan from the rack and hurried to the fireplace, where Tam was relighting his pipe with a blazing ember, for the dozenth time. Molly had no love for Tam, and finding him in her way, she calmly gave a quick pull to his plaidie, and Tam, who was in a crouching position, fell backward, sprawling on the hearth in a decidedly undignified attitude. With the roar of a wounded lion, he scrambled to his feet, with the assistance of Souter, and shaking his fist at the laughing Molly, he sputtered indignantly, “Is the Deil himsel’ in ye, Molly Dunn? Ye’re an impudent hussy, that’s what ye are.” Molly glared at him defiantly for a moment, then calmly proceeded to fill her pan with hot water, while the old man, bursting with indignation, staggered over to the dresser where Mistress Burns was brewing some tea.



“Mistress Burns,” he remonstrated almost tearfully, “ye should teach your servants better manners. Molly Dunn is a——” but he never finished his sentence, for Molly, hurrying back with the hot water, ran into him and, whether by design or accident it was never known, spilled the hot contents of the pan over Tam’s shins, whereupon he gave what resembled a burlesque imitation of a Highland fling to the accompaniment of roars of pain and anger from himself and guffaws of laughter from Souter and Molly. Even Mrs. Burns and Gilbert could not resist a smile at the antics of the old tyke.

“Toots, mon,” said Molly, not at all abashed at the mischief she had done, “ye’re no hurt; ye’ll get mair than that at hame, I’m tellin’ ye,” and she nodded her head sagely.

“Molly, hold your tongue,” said Mistress Burns reprovingly, then she turned to Tam. “I hope ye’re nae burnt bad.” But Tam was very angry, and turning to Souter he cried wrathfully, “I’m gang hame, Souter Johnny. I’ll no stay here to be insulted; I’m gang hame.” And he started for the door.

“Dinna mind Molly; she’s daft like,” replied Souter in a soothing voice. “Come and sit doon,” and he tried to pull him toward the fireplace, but Tam was not to be pacified. His dignity had been outraged.

“Nay, nay, Souter, I thank ye!” he said firmly.



“An’ ye, too, Mistress Burns, for your kind invitation to stay langer,” she looked at him quickly, then gave a little sniff, “but I ken when I’m insulted,” and disengaging himself from Souter’s restraining hand, he started for the door once more.

“An’ where will ye be gang at this hour, Tam?” insinuated Souter slyly. “Ye ken your guidwife’s temper.”

“I’m gang over to the Inn,” replied Tam defiantly, with his hand on the open door. “Will ye gang alang wi’ me, Souter? A wee droppie will cheer us both,” he continued persuasively.

Souter looked anxiously at Gilbert’s stern, frowning face, then back to Tam. “I’d like to amazin’ weel, Tam,” he replied in a plaintive tone, “but ye see——”

“Johnny has promised me he’ll keep sober till plantin’ is over,” interrupted Gilbert firmly; “after that he can do as he likes.”

“Ye should both be ashamed o’ yoursel’s drinkin’ that vile whisky,” said Mrs. Burns angrily, and she clacked her lips in disgust. “It is your worst enemy, I’m tellin’ ye.”

“Ye mind, Mistress Burns,” replied Souter, winking his left eye at Tam, “ye mind the Scriptures say, ‘Love your enemies.’ Weel, we’re just tryin’ to obey the Scriptures, eh, Tam?”

“Aye, Souter,” answered Tam with drunken gravity, “I always obey the Scriptures.”



"Here, mon, drink a cup of tea before ye gang awa'," said Mrs. Burns, and she took him a brimming cup of the delicious beverage, thinking it might assuage his thirst for something stronger. Tam majestically waved it away.

"Nay, I thank ye, Mistress Burns, I'll no' deprive ye of it," he answered with extreme condescension. "Tea doesno' agree with Tam O'Shanter." He pushed open the door. "I'm off to the Inn, where the *tea* is more to my likin'. Guid-day to ye all," and, slamming the door behind him, he called Maggie to his side, and jumping astride her old back galloped speedily toward the village Inn. The last heard of him that day was his voice lustily singing "The Campbells Are Coming."

After he left the room Mistress Burns handed Souter the cup of tea she had poured for Tam, and soon the silence was unbroken save by an occasional sigh from the old tyke as he sipped his tea.

Presently Gilbert set down his empty cup, rose and donned his coat. "Here we are drinking tea, afternoon tea, as if we were of the quality," he observed sarcastically, "instead of being out in the fields plowing the soil; there's much to be done ere sun-down."

"Weel, this suits me fine," murmured Souter contentedly, draining his cup. "I ken I was born to be one o' the quality; work doesno' agree wi' me, o'er weel," and he snuggled closer in his chair.



“Ye’re very much like my fine brother Robert in that respect,” answered Gilbert bitterly, his face growing stern and cold. “But we want no laggards here on Mossgiel. Farmers must work, an’ work hard, if they would live.” He walked to the window and looked out over the untilled ground with hard, angry eyes, and his heart filled with bitterness as he thought of his elder brother. It had always fallen to him to finish the many tasks his dreaming, thoughtless, erratic brother had left unfinished, while the latter sought some sequestered spot where, with pencil and paper in hand, he would idle away his time writing verses. And for a year now Robert had been in Irvine, no doubt enjoying himself to the full, while he, Gilbert, toiled and slaved at home to keep the poor shelter over his dear ones. It was neither right nor just, he thought, with an aching heart.

“Ye ken, Gilbert,” said Souter Johnny, breaking in on his reverie, “Robert wasna’ born to be a farmer. He always cared more, even when a wee laddie, for writin’ poetry and dreamin’ o’ the lasses than toilin’ in the fields, more’s the pity.”

Mrs. Burns turned on him quickly. “Souter Johnny, dinna ye dare say a word against Robert,” she flashed indignantly. “He could turn the best furrrough o’ any lad in these parts, ye ken that weel,” and Souter was completely annihilated by the angry flash that gleamed in the mother’s eye, and it was a very humble Souter that hesitatingly held out



his cup to her, hoping to change the subject. "Hae ye a wee droppie mair tea there, Mistress Burns?" he meekly asked.

Mrs. Burns was not to be mollified, however. "Aye, but not for ye, ye skellum," she answered shortly, taking the cup from him and putting it in the dishpan.

"Come along, Souter," said Gilbert, going to the door. "We hae much to do ere sundown and hae idled too long, noo. Come."

"Ye're workin' me too hard, Gilbert," groaned Souter despairingly. "My back is nigh broken; bide a wee, mon!"

A sharp whistle from without checked Gilbert as he was about to reply. "The Posty has stopped at the gate," exclaimed Mistress Burns excitedly, rushing to the window in time to see old Molly receive a letter from that worthy, and then come running back to the house. Hurrying to the door, she snatched it from the old servant's hands and eagerly held it to the light. Molly peered anxiously over her shoulder.

"It's frae Robbie," she exclaimed delightedly. "Keep quiet, noo, till I read it to the end." As she finished, the tears of gladness rolled down her smooth cheek. "Oh, Gilbert," she said, a little catch in her voice, "Robert is somin' back to us. He'll be here this day. Read it, lad, read for yoursel'." He took the letter and walked to the fireplace. After a slight



pause he read it. As she watched him she noticed with sudden apprehension the look of anger that darkened his face. She had forgotten the misunderstanding which had existed between the brothers since their coming to Mossgiel to live, and suddenly her heart misgave her.

“Gilbert lad,” she hesitatingly said as he finished the letter, “dinna say aught to Robert when he comes hame about his rhyming, will ye, laddie?” She paused and looked anxiously into his sullen face. “He canna bear to be discouraged, ye ken,” and she took the letter from him and put it in her bosom. Gilbert remained silent and moody, a heavy frown wrinkling his brow.

“Perhaps all thoughts of poesy has left him since he has been among strangers,” continued the mother thoughtfully. “Ye ken he has been doin’ right weel in Irvine; and it’s only because the flax dresser’s shop has burned to the ground, and he canna work any more, that he decides to come hame to help us noo. Ye ken that, Gilbert.” She laid her hand in tender pleading on his sunburnt arm.

“He always shirked his work before,” replied Gilbert bitterly, “and nae doot he will again. But he maun work, an’ work hard, if he wants to stay at Mossgiel. Nae more lyin’ around, scribblin’ on every piece of paper he finds, a lot of nonsense, which willna’ put food in his mouth, nor clothe his back.” Mrs. Burns sighed deeply and sank into the



low stool beside her spinning wheel, he hands folded for once idly in her lap, and gave herself up to her disquieting thoughts.

“Ye can talk all ye like,” exclaimed Souter, who was ever ready with his advice, “but Robert is too smart a lad to stay here for lang. He was never cut out for a farmer nae mair was I.”

“A farmer,” repeated Mrs. Burns, with a mirthless little laugh. “An’ what is there in a farmer’s life to pay for all the hardships he endures?” she asked bitterly. “The constant grindin’ an’ endless toil crushes all the life out o’ one in the struggle for existence. Remember your father, Gilbert,” and her voice broke at the flood of bitter recollection which crowded her thoughts.

“I have na forgotten him, mithers,” replied Gilbert quietly. “Nor am I likely to, for my ain lot in life is nae better.” And pulling his cap down over his eyes, he went back to the window and gazed moodily out over the bare, rocky, profitless farm which must be made to yield them a living. There was silence for a time, broken only by the regular monotonous ticking of the old clock. After a time Mrs. Burns quietly left the room.

“Oh, laddie,” whispered Souter as the door closed behind her, coming up beside Gilbert, “did ye hear the news that Tam O’Shanter brought frae Mauchline?”

“Do you mean about Robert an’ some lassie



there?" inquired Gilbert indifferently, after a brief pause.

"Aye!" returned Souter impressively, "but she's nae common lass, Gilbert. She's Squire Armour's daughter Jean, called the Belle of Mauchline."

"I ken it's no serious," replied Gilbert sarcastically, "for ye ken Robert's heart is like a tinder box, that flares up at the first whisper of passion," and he turned away from the window and started for the door.

"I canna' understand," reflected Souter, "how the lad could forget his sweetheart, Highland Mary, long enough to take up wi any ither lassie. They were mighty fond o' each ither before he went awa' a year ago. I can swear to that," and he smiled reminiscently.

A look of despair swept over Gilbert's face at the idle words of the garrulous old man. He leaned heavily against the door, for there was a dull, aching pain at his heart of which he was physically conscious. For a few moments he stood there with white drawn face, trying hard to realize the bitter truth, that at last the day had come, as he had feared it must come, when he must step aside for the prodigal brother who would now claim his sweetheart. And she would go to him so gladly, he knew, without a single thought of his loneliness or his sorrow. But she was not to blame. It was only right that she should now be with her sweetheart, that he must say farewell to those



blissful walks along the banks of the Doon which for almost a year he had enjoyed with Mary by his side. His stern, tense lips relaxed, and a faint smile softened his rugged features. How happy he had been in his fool's paradise. But he loved her so dearly that he had been content just to be with her, to listen to the sweetness of her voice as she prattled innocently and lovingly of her absent sweetheart. A snore from Souter, who had fallen asleep in his chair, roused him from the fond reverie into which he had fallen, and brought him back to earth with a start. With a bitter smile he told himself he had no right to complain. If he had allowed himself to fall in love with his brother's betrothed, he alone was to blame, and he must suffer the consequence. Suddenly a wild thought entered his brain. Suppose—and his heart almost stopped beating at the thought—suppose Robert had grown to love someone else, while away, even better than he did Mary? He had heard rumors of Robert's many amorous escapades in Mauchline; then perhaps Mary would again turn to him for comfort. His eyes shone with renewed hope and his heart was several degrees lighter as he left the house. Going to the high knoll back of the cottage, he gazed eagerly, longingly, across the moor to where, in the hazy distance, the lofty turrets of Castle Montgomery, the home of the winsome dairy-maid, Mary Campbell, reared their heads toward the blue heavens.



## CHAPTER II

Ye banks and braes and streams around  
The Castle of Montgomery,  
Green be your woods and fair your flowers,  
Your waters never drumlie,  
There summer first unfolds her robes,  
And there the langest tarry,  
For there I took the last farewell  
O' my sweet Highland Mary.

AT the foot of the hill on which stood Castle Montgomery flowed the River Doon, winding and twisting itself through richly wooded scenery on its way to Ayr Bay. On the hillside of the stream stood the old stone dairy, covered with ivy and shaded by overhanging willows. Within its cool, shady walls the merry lassies sang at their duties, with hearts as light and carefree as the birds that flew about the open door. Their duties over for the day, they had returned to their quarters in the long, low wing of the castle, and silence reigned supreme over the place, save for the trickling of the Doon splashing over the stones as it wended its tuneful way to join the waters of the Ayr.

Suddenly the silence was broken; borne on the evening breeze came the sound of a sweet, high voice singing:



“Oh where and oh where is my Highland laddie gone,”

sang the sweet singer, plaintively from the hilltop. Nearer and nearer it approached as the owner followed the winding path down to the river's bank. Suddenly the drooping willows were parted, and there looked out the fairest face surely that mortal eyes had ever seen.

About sixteen years of age, with ringlets of flaxen hair flowing unconfined to her waist, laughing blue eyes, bewitchingly overarched by dark eyebrows, a rosebud mouth, now parted in song, between two rounded dimpled cheeks, such was the bonnie face of Mary Campbell, known to all around as “Highland Mary.” Removing her plaidie, which hung gracefully from one shoulder, she spread it on the mossy bank, and, casting herself down full length upon it, her head pillowed in her hand, she finished her song, lazily, dreamily, letting it die out, slowly, softly floating into nothingness. Then for a moment she gave herself up to the mere joy of living, watching the leaves as they fell noiselessly into the stream and were carried away, away until they were lost to vision. Gradually her thoughts became more centered. That particular spot was full of sweet memories to her. It was here, she mused dreamily, that she and Robert had parted a year ago. It was here on the banks of the Doon they so often had met and courted and loved, and here it was they had



stood hand in hand and plighted their troth, while the murmuring stream seemed to whisper softly, "For eternity, for all eternity." And here in this sequestered spot, on that second Sunday of May, they had spent the day in taking a last farewell. Would she ever forget it? Oh, the pain of that parting! Her eyes filled with tears at the recollection of her past misery. But she brushed them quickly away with a corner of her scarf. He had promised to send for her when he was getting along well, and she had been waiting day after day for that summons, full of faith in his word. For had he not said as he pressed her to his heart:

"I hae sworn by the heavens to my Mary,  
I hae sworn by the heavens to be true.  
And so may the heavens forget me,  
When I forget my vow."

A whole year had passed. She had saved all her little earnings, and now her box was nearly filled with the linen which she had spun and woven with her own fair hands, for she did not mean to come dow-erless to her husband. In a few months, so he had written in his last letter, he would send for her to come to him, and they would start for the new country, America, where gold could be picked up in the streets (so she had heard it said). They could not help but prosper, and so the child mused on happily. The sudden blast of a horn interrupted her sweet day dreams, and, hastily jumping to her feet,



with a little ejaculation of dismay she tossed her plaidie over her back, and, filling her pail from the brook, swung it lightly to her strong young shoulder.

“An’ it’s o’ in my heart, I wish him safe at home,”

she trilled longingly, as she retraced her steps up the winding path, over the hill, and back to the kitchen, where, after giving the pail into the hand of Bess, the good-natured cook, she leaned against the lintel of the door, her hands shading her wistful eyes, and gazed long and earnestly off to where the sun was sinking behind the horizon in far-off Irvine. So wrapped was she in her thoughts she failed to hear the whistle of Rory Cam, the Posty, and the bustle and confusion which his coming had created within the kitchen. The sharp little shrieks and ejaculations of surprise and delight, however, caused her to turn her head inquiringly. Looking through the open door, she saw Bess in the center of a gaping crowd of servants, reading a letter, the contents of which had evoked the delight of her listeners. “An’ he’ll be here this day,” cried Bess loudly, folding her letter. “Where’s Mary Campbell?” she demanded, looking around the room.

“Here I am, Bess,” said Mary, standing shyly at the door.

“Hae ye heard the news, then, lassie?” asked Bess, grinning broadly.

“Nay; what news?” inquired Mary, wondering why they all looked at her so knowingly.



“I’ve just had word frae my sister in Irvine, an’ she said——” Here Bess paused impressively. “She said that Rob Burns was burnt out o’ his place, an’ that he would be comin’ hame to-day.” Bess, who had good-naturedly wished to surprise Mary, was quite startled to see her turn as white as a lily and stagger back against the door with a little gasp of startled surprise.

“Are ye sure, Bess?” she faltered, her voice shaking with eagerness.

“It’s true as Gospel, lassie; I’ll read ye the letter,” and Bess started to take it out, but with a cry of joy Mary rushed through the door like a startled fawn, and before the astonished maids could catch their breath she had lightly vaulted over the hedge and was flying down the hill and over the moor toward Mossgiel farm with the speed of a swallow, her golden hair floating behind her like a cloud of glorious sunshine. On, on she sped, swift as the wind, and soon Mossgiel loomed up in the near distance. Not stopping for breath, she soon reached the door, and without pausing to knock burst into the room.

Mrs. Burns had put the house in order and, with a clean ’kerchief and cap on, sat patiently at her wheel, waiting for Robert to come home, while Souter quietly sat in the corner winding a ball of yarn from the skein which hung over the back of the chair, and looking decidedly sheepish. When Mary burst in



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the door so unceremoniously they both jumped expectantly to their feet, thinking surely it was Robert.

“Why, Mary lass, is it ye?” said Mrs. Burns in surprise. “Whatever brings ye over the day? not but we are glad to have ye,” she added hospitably.

“Where is he, Mistress Burns, where’s Robbie?” she panted excitedly, her heart in her voice.

“He isn’a’ here yet, lassie,” replied Mrs. Burns, with a sigh. “But sit ye doon. Take off your plaidie and wait for him. There’s a girlye,” and she pushed the unresisting girl into a chair.

“Ye’re sure he isn’a’ here, Mistress Burns?” asked Mary wistfully, looking around the room with eager, searching eyes.

“Aye, lassie,” she replied, smiling; “if he were he wouldna’ be hidin’ from ye, dearie, and after a year of absence, too. But I ken he will be here soon noo.” And she went to the window and looked anxiously out across the moor.

“It seems so lang since he left Mossgiel, doesna’ it, Mistress Burns?” said Mary with a deep sigh of disappointment.

“An’ weel ye might say that,” replied Mrs. Burns. “For who doesna’ miss my laddie,” and she tossed her head proudly. “There isn’a’ another like Robbie in all Ayrshire. A bright, honest, upright, pure-minded lad, whom any mither might be proud of. I hope he’ll return to us the same laddie he was when



he went awa'." The anxious look returned to her comely face.

An odd little smile appeared about the corners of Souter's mouth as he resumed his work.

"Weel, noo, Mistress Burns," he asked dryly, "do ye expect a healthy lad to be out in this sinful world an' not learn a few things he didna ken before? 'Tis only human nature," continued the old rogue, "an' ye can learn a deal in a year, mind that, an' that reminds me o' a good joke. Sandy MacPherson——"

"Souter Johnny, ye keep your stories to yoursel'," interrupted Mrs. Burns with a frown. Souter's stories were not always discreet.

"Irvine and Mauchline are very gay towns," continued Souter reminiscently. "They say some of the prettiest gurls of Scotlan' live there, an' I hear they all love Robbie Burns, too," he added slyly, looking at Mary out of the corner of his eye.

"They couldna help it," replied Mary sweetly.

"An' ye're nae jealous, Mary?" he inquired in a surprised tone, turning to look into the flushed, shy face beside him.

"Jealous of Robert?" echoed Mary, opening her innocent eyes to their widest. "Nay! for I ken he loves me better than any other lassie in the world." And she added naively, "He has told me so oft-times."

"Ye needna fear, Mary," replied Mrs. Burns,



resuming her place at the wheel. "I'll hae no ither lass but ye for my daughter, depend on't."

"Thank ye, Mistress Burns," said Mary brightly. "I ken I'm only a simple country lass, but I mean to learn all I can, so that when he becomes a great man he'll no be ashamed of me, for I ken he will be great some day," she continued, her eyes flashing, the color coming and going in her cheek as she predicted the future of the lad she loved. "He's a born poet, Mistress Burns, and some day ye'll be proud of your lad, for genius such as Rabbie's canna always be hid." Mrs. Burns gazed at the young girl in wonder.

"Oh, if someone would only encourage him," continued Mary earnestly, "for I'm fair sure his heart is set on rhyming."

"I ne'er heard of a body ever makin' money writin' verses," interposed Souter, rubbing his chin reflectively with the ball of soft yarn.

"Ah, me," sighed Mrs. Burns, her hands idle for a moment, "I fear the lad does but waste his time in such scribbling. Who is to hear it? Only his friends, who are partial to him, of course, but who, alas, are as puir as we are, and canna assist him in bringin' them before the public. The fire burns out for lack of fuel," she continued slowly, watching the flickering sparks die one by one in the fireplace. "So will his love of writin' when he sees how hopeless it all is." She paused and sighed deeply. "He maun



do mair than write verses to keep a wife and family from want," she continued earnestly, and she looked sadly at Mary's downcast face. "And, Mary, ye too will hae to work, harder than ye hae ever known, even as I have; so hard, dearie, that the heart grows sick and weary and faint in the struggle to keep the walf awa'."

"I am no afraid of hard work," answered Mary bravely, swallowing the sympathetic tears which rose to her eyes. "If poverty is to be his portion I shall na shrink from sharin' it wi' him," and her eyes shone with love and devotion.

Mrs. Burns rose and put her arms lovingly about her. "God bless ye, dearie," she said softly, smoothing the tangled curls away from the broad low brow with tender, caressing fingers.

"Listen!" cried Mary, as the wail of the bagpipes was heard in the distance. "'Tis old blind Donald," and running to the window she threw back the sash with a cry of delight. "Oh, how I love the music of the pipes!" she murmured passionately, and her sweet voice vibrated with feeling, for she thought of her home so far away in the Highlands and the dear ones she had not seen for so long.

"Isna he the merry one this day," chuckled Souter, keeping time with his feet and hands, not heeding the yarn, which had slipped from the chair, and which was fast becoming entangled about his feet.



"It's fair inspirin'!" cried Mary, clapping her hands ecstatically. "Doesna it take ye back to the Highlands, Souter?" she asked happily.

"Aye, lassie," replied Souter. "But it's there among the hills and glens that the music of the pipes is most entrancin'," he added loyally, for he was a true Highlander. The strains of the "Cock of the North" grew louder and louder as old Donald drew near the farm, and Mary, who could no longer restrain her joyous impulse, with a little excited laugh, her face flushing rosily, ran to the center of the room, where, one hand on her hip, her head tossed back, she began to dance. Her motion was harmony itself as she gracefully swayed to and fro, darting here and there like some elfin sprite, her bare feet twinkling like will-o'-the-wisps, so quickly did they dart in and out from beneath her short plaid skirt. With words of praise they both encouraged her to do her best.

Louder and louder the old piper blew, quicker and quicker the feet of the dancer sped, till, with a gasp of exhaustion, Mary sank panting into the big arm-chair, feeling very warm and very tired, but very happy.

"Ye dance bonnie, dearie, bonnie," exclaimed Mrs. Burns delightedly, pouring her a cup of tea, which Mary drank gratefully.

"Oh, dearie me," Mary said apologetically, putting down her empty cup, "whatever came o'er me? I'm a gaucie wild thing this day, for true, but I



canna held dancin' when I hear the pipes," and she smiled bashfully into the kind face bent over her.

"Music affects me likewise," replied Souter, trying to untangle the yarn from around his feet, but only succeeding in making a bad matter worse. "Music always goes to my feet like whusky, only whusky touches me here first," and he tapped his head humorously with his forefinger.

"Souter Johnny, ye skellum!" cried Mrs. Burns, noticing for the first time the mischief he had wrought. "Ye're not worth your salt, ye ne'er-do-weel. Ye've spoiled my yarn," and she glared at the crestfallen Souter with fire in her usually calm eye.

"It was an accident, Mistress Burns," stammered Souter, awkwardly shifting his weight from one foot to the other in his efforts to free himself from the persistent embrace of the clinging yarn.

With no gentle hand Mrs. Burns shoved him into a chair and proceeded to extricate his feet from the tangled web which held him prisoner. Soon she freed the offending members and rose to her feet. "Noo gang awa'," she sputtered. "Ye've vexed me sair. Gang out and help Gilbert. I canna bide ye round." Souter took his Tam O'Shanter, which hung over the fireplace, and ambled to the door.

"Very weel," he said meekly, "I'll go. Souter Johnny can take a hint as weel as the next mon," and he closed the door gently behind him and slowly wended his way across the field to where Gilbert was sitting, dreamily looking across the moor.



### CHAPTER III

“WHY doesna he come, Mistress Burns?” said Mary pathetically. They had come down to the field where Gilbert was now at work the better to watch for their loved one’s approach. “Twilight is comin’ on an’ ’tis a lang walk to Castle Montgomery at night. I canna wait much langer noo.”

“Never ye mind, lassie; ye shall stay the night with me,” replied Mrs. Burns soothingly, “if Robert doesna come.”

“I’ll take ye back, Mary,” said Gilbert eagerly, going up to her. Perhaps Robert was not coming after all, he thought with wildly beating heart.

“Thank ye, Gilbert, but I’ll wait a wee bit longer,” answered Mary hopefully; “perhaps he’ll be here soon,” and she dejectedly dug her bare toes into the damp earth.

“Well, lassie, I canna waste any mair time,” said Mrs. Burns energetically. “Ye can stay here with Gilbert, while I return to my spinning. Come, Souter, there’s some firewood to be split,” and she quickly walked to the house, followed more slowly by the reluctant Souter.

Gilbert, with his soul in his eyes, feasted on the pathetic loveliness of the sweet face beside him, gazing wistfully toward Mauchline, and his aching heart



yearned to clasp her to his breast, to tell her of his love, to plead for her pity, her love, herself, for he felt he would rather die than give her up to another. He drew closer to her.

“What is the matter, Gilbert?” asked Mary anxiously, noting his pale face. “Are ye in pain?”

“Aye, Mary, in pain,” he answered passionately. “Such pain I’ll hope ye’ll never know.” He bowed his head.

“I’m so sorry, lad,” she replied innocently. “I wish I could help ye,” and she looked compassionately at the suffering man.

He raised his head suddenly and looked into her eyes.

“Are ye goin’ to marry Robert this summer, when he returns?” he asked abruptly, his voice husky with emotion.

“Aye, if he wishes it,” answered Mary simply, wondering why he looked so strangely white.

“He has been gone a year, ye ken,” continued Gilbert hoarsely. “Suppose he has changed and no langer loves ye?” She looked at him with big, frightened eyes. She had never thought of that possibility before. What if he did no longer love her? she thought fearfully. She looked about her helplessly. She felt bewildered, dazed; slowly she sank down on the rocky earth, her trembling limbs refusing to support her. Her fair head drooped pathetically, like a lily bent and bruised by the storm.



"If Robert doesna want me any more," she murmured after a pause, a pathetic little catch in her voice, "if he loves someone else better than he does his Highland Mary, then I—I——"

"Ye'll soon forget him, Mary," interrupted Gilbert eagerly, his heart throbbing with hope. She raised her eyes from which all the light had flown and looked at him sadly, reproachfully.

"Nay, lad, I wouldna care to live any longer," she said quietly. "My heart would just break," and she smiled a pitiful little smile which smote him like a knife thrust. He caught her two hands in his passionately and pressed them to his heart with a cry of pain.

"Dinna mind what I said, lass," he cried, conscience stricken; "dinna look like that. I dinna mean to grieve ye, Mary, I love ye too well." And almost before he realized it he had recklessly, passionately, incoherently told her of his love for her, his jealousy of his brother, his grief and pain at losing her. Mary gazed at him in wonder, scarcely understanding his wild words, his excited manner.

"I'm fair pleased that ye love me, Gilbert," she answered him in her innocence. "Ye ken I love ye too, for ye've been so kind and good to me ever since Robert has been awa'," and she pressed his hand affectionately. With a groan of despair he released her and turned away without another word. Suddenly she understood, and a great wave of sym-



pathy welled up in her heart. "Oh, Gilbert," she cried sorrowfully, a world of compassion in her voice. "I understand ye noo, laddie, an' I'm so sorry, so sorry." He bit his lips till the blood came. Finally he spoke in a tone of quiet bitterness.

"I've been living in a fool's paradise this past year," he said, "but 'tis all ended noo. Why, ever since he went awa' I have wished, hoped, and even prayed that Rob would never return to Mossiel, that ye might forget him and his accursed poetry, and in time would become my wife." He threw out his hands with a despairing gesture as he finished.

"Oh, Gilbert," she faltered, with tears in her eyes, "I never dreamed ye thought of me in that way. Had I only known, I——" she broke off abruptly and looked away toward the cottage.

"Ye see what a villain I have been," he continued with a bitter smile. "But ye have nothin' to blame yoursel' for, Mary. I had no right to think of ye ither than as Robert's betrothed wife."

"I'm so sorry, lad," repeated Mary compassionately. Then her downcast face brightened. "Let us both forget what has passed this day, and be the same good friends as ever, wi'na we, Gilbert?" And she held out her hand to him with her old winning smile.

"God bless ye, lassie," he replied brokenly. Quietly they stood there for a few minutes, then with a sudden start they realized that deep twilight had fallen



upon them. Silently, stealthily it had descended, like a quickly drawn curtain. Slowly they wended their way back to the cottage. When they reached the door Mary suddenly turned and peered into the deepening twilight.

"Listen!" she said breathlessly. "Dinna ye hear a voice, Gilbert?" He listened for a minute. Faintly there came on the still air the distant murmur of many voices.

"'Tis only the lads on their way to the village," he replied quietly. With a little shiver, Mary drew her plaidie closely about her, for the air had grown cool.

"I think I'll hae to be goin' noo," she said dejectedly. "He willna be here this night."

"Very well," answered Gilbert. "I'll saddle the mare and take ye back. Bide here a wee," and he left her. She could hardly restrain the disappointed tears, which rose to her eyes.

Why didn't Robert come? What could keep him so late? She so longed to see her laddie once more. She idly wondered why the lads, whose voices she now heard quite plainly, were coming toward Mossgiel. There was no inn hereabouts. By the light of the rising moon she saw them on the moor, ever drawing nearer and nearer, but they had no interest for her. Nothing interested her now. She leaned back against the wall of the cottage and patiently awaited Gilbert's return.



“He’s comin’! he’s comin’!” suddenly exclaimed the voice of Mrs. Burns from within the cottage. “My lad is comin’! Out of my way, ye skellum!” and out she ran, her face aglow with love and excitement, followed by Souter, who was shouting gleefully, “He’s comin’! he’s comin’! Robbie’s comin’!” and off he sped in her footsteps, to meet the returned wanderer.

“It’s Robbie! it’s Robbie!” cried Mary joyously, her nerves a-quiver, as she heard the vociferous outburst of welcome from the lads, who were bringing him in triumph to his very door.

“Welcome hame, laddie!” shouted the crowd, as they came across the field, singing, laughing and joking like schoolboys on a frolic.

“Oh, I canna’, I darena’ meet him before them a’,” she exclaimed aloud, blushing rosily, frightened at the thought of meeting him before the good-natured country folk.

She would wait till they all went away, and, turning, she ran into the house like a timid child. Quickly she hid behind the old fireplace, listening shyly, as she heard them approach the open door.

“Thank ye, lads, for your kind welcome,” said Robert as he reached the threshold, one arm around his mother. “I didna’ ken I had left so many friends in Mossgiel,” and he looked around gratefully at the rugged faces that were grinning broadly into his.

“Come doon to the Inn and hae a wee nippie for



auld lang syne," sang out Sandy MacPherson, with an inviting wave of the hand.

"Nay, an' he'll not gang a step, Sandy MacPherson," cried Mrs. Burns indignantly, clinging closely to her son.

"Nay, I thank ye, Sandy," laughingly replied Robert. "Ye must excuse me to-night. I'll see ye all later, and we'll have a lang chat o'er auld times."

"Come awa' noo, Robert," said Mrs. Burns lovingly, "an' I'll get ye a bite and a sup," and she drew him into the house.

"Good-night, lads; I'll see ye to-morrow," he called back to them cheerily.

"Good-night," they answered in a chorus, and with "three cheers for Robbie Burns" that made the welkin ring, they departed into the night, merrily singing "Should auld acquaintance be forgot?" a song Robert himself had written before leaving Mossgiel.



## CHAPTER IV

“Ан, Souter Johnny, how are ye, mon?” cried Robert heartily, as his eyes rested on the beaming face of the old man. “Faith, an’ I thought I’d find ye here as of old. ’Tis almost a fixture ye are.”

“Ah, weel,” replied Souter nonchalantly, as he shook Robert’s outstretched hand, “ye ken the Scripture says, ‘an’ the poor ye have always wi’ ye.’” Robert laughed merrily at the old man’s sally.

“Thank goodness, they’ve gone at last,” said Mrs. Burns with a sigh of relief, as she entered the room. “Why, laddie, ye had half the ne’er-do-weels of Moss-giel a-following ye. They are only a lot of leeches and idle brawlers, that’s a’,” and her dark eyes flashed her disapproval.

“I’m sure they have kind hearts, mither, for a’ that,” replied Robert reproachfully.

“Ye’re so popular wi’ them a’, Robbie,” cried Souter proudly.

“Aye, when he has a shillin’ to spend on them,” added Mrs. Burns dryly. “But sit doon, laddie; ye maun be tired wi’ your lang walk,” and she gently pushed him into a chair beside the table.

“I am a wee bittie tired,” sighed Robert gratefully as he leaned back in the chair.



"I'll soon hae something to eat before ye," replied his mother briskly.

"I'm nae hungry, mother," answered Robert. "Indeed, I couldna' eat a thing," he remonstrated as she piled the food before him.

"'Tis in love ye are," insinuated Souter with a knowing look. "I ken the symptoms weel; ye canna' eat."

"Ye're wrong there," replied Robert with a bright smile. "Love but increases my appetite."

"Aye, for love," added Souter *sotto voce*.

"Ah, mother dear, how guid it seems to be at hame again, under the old familiar roof-tree," said Robert a little later, as he leaned back contentedly in his chair and gazed about the room with eager, alert glances. As he sits there with his arms folded let us take a look at our hero. Of more than medium height, his form suggested agility as well as strength. His high forehead, shaded with black curling hair tied at the neck, indicated extensive capacity. His eyes were large, dark, and full of fire and intelligence. His face was well formed and uncommonly interesting and expressive, although at the first glance his features had a certain air of coarseness, mingled with an expression of calm thoughtfulness, approaching melancholy. He was dressed carelessly in a blue homespun long coat, belted at the waist, over a buff-colored vest; short blue pantaloons, tucked into long gray home-knit stockings, which came up above his



knee, and broad low brogans, made by Souter's hands. He wore a handsome plaid of small white and black checks over one shoulder, the ends being brought together under the opposite arm and tied loosely behind.

"'Tis a fine hame-comin' ye've had, laddie," cried old Souter proudly. "Faith, it's just like they give the heir of grand estates. We should hae had a big bonfire burnin' outside our—ahem—palace gates," and he waved his hand grandiloquently.

"Dinna' ye make fun of our poor clay biggin', Souter Johnny," cried Mrs. Burns rebukingly. "Be it ever so poor, 'tis our hame."

"Aye, 'tis our hame, mother," repeated Robert lovingly. "An' e'en tho' I have been roaming in other parts, still this humble cottage is the dearest spot on earth to me. I love it all, every stick and stone, each blade of grass, every familiar object that greeted my eager gaze as I crossed the moor to this haven of rest, my hame. And my love for it this moment is the strongest feeling within me."

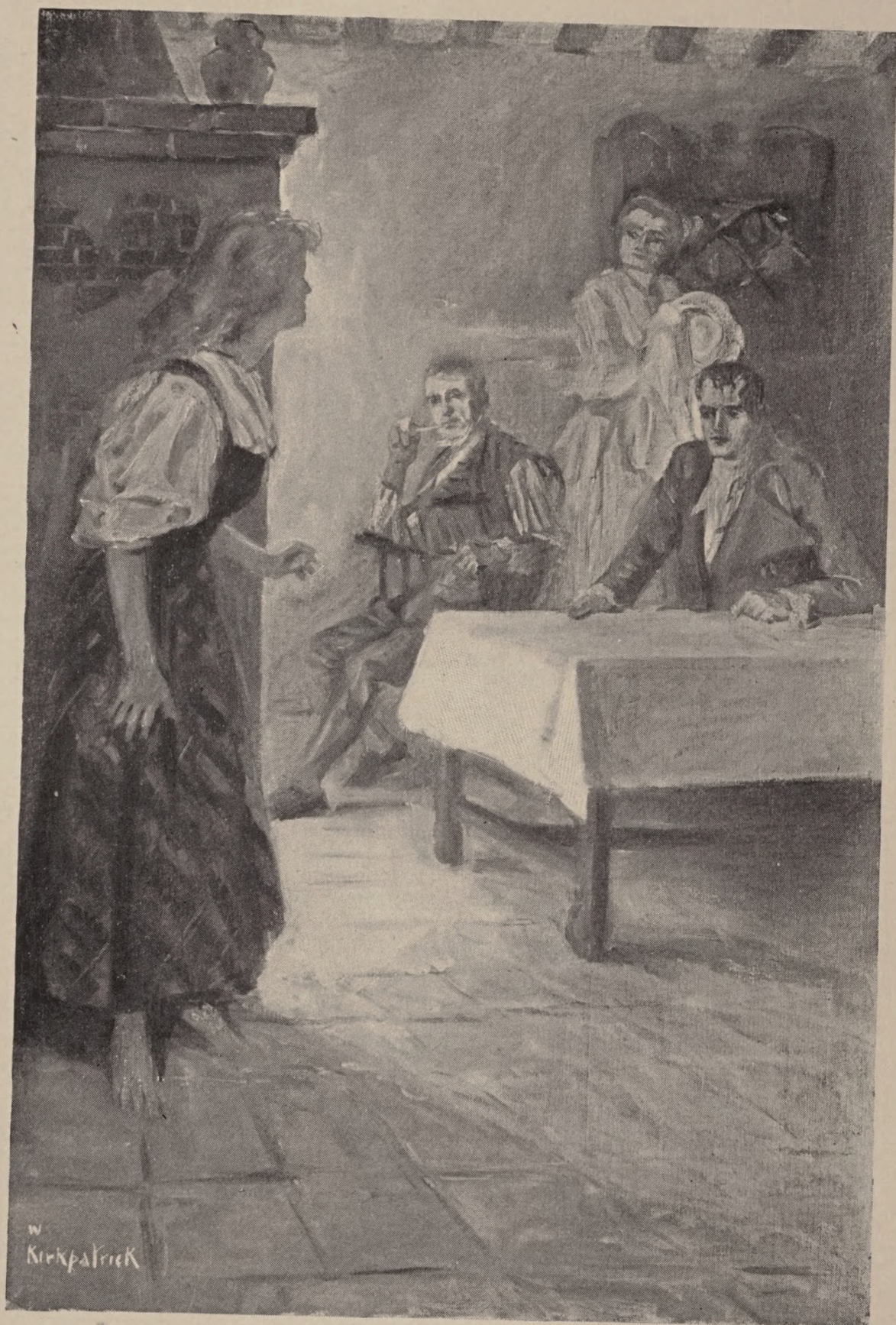
His roving eyes tenderly sought out one by one the familiar bits of furniture around the room, and lingered for a moment lovingly on the old fireplace. It was there he had first seen Mary Campbell. She had come to the cottage on an errand, and as she stood leaning against the mantel, the sunlight gleaming through the window upon her golden hair, he had entered the room. It was plainly love at first



sight, and so he had told her that same day, as he walked back to Castle Montgomery with the winsome dairymaid. The course of their love had flowed smoothly and uneventfully; he loved her with all the depth of his passionate emotional nature, and yet his love was more spiritual than physical. She was an endless source of inspiration, as many a little song and ode which had appeared in the Tarbolton weekly from time to time could testify. How long the year had been away from her, he mused dreamily. To-morrow, bright and early, he would hurry over to Castle Montgomery and surprise her at her duties.

Mary, from her hiding place, had watched all that happened since Robert had come into the room. She had not expected to remain so long hidden, she thought wistfully. She had hoped that Mrs. Burns would miss her, and that she, or Robert, or someone would look for her, but they had not even thought of her, and her lips trembled pitiously at their neglect. And so she had stayed on, peeping out at them, whenever their backs were turned, feeling very lonely, and very miserable, in spite of the pride that thrilled her, as she watched her lover sitting there so handsome in the full strength of his young manhood. Perhaps they didn't want her here to-night. Perhaps it was true, as Gilbert said, "that Robert didn't love her any more." The tears could no longer be restrained. If she could only slip out





“Gazed straight into the startled eyes of Robert.”







unobserved she would go home. She wasn't afraid, she thought miserably. She wondered what they were doing now, they were so quiet? Peering shyly around the mantel, she gazed straight into the startled eyes of Robert, who with a surprised ejaculation started back in amazement.

"Why, Mary Campbell!" cried his mother remorsefully, as she caught sight of Mary's face, "I declare I clear forgot ye, lass." With a glad cry Robert sprang toward her and grasped her two hands in his own, his eyes shining with love and happiness.

"Mary, lass, were ye hidin' awa' from me?" he asked in tender reproach. She dropped her head bashfully without a word. "'Tis o'er sweet in ye, dear, to come over to welcome me hame," he continued radiantly. "Come an' let me look at ye," and he drew her gently to where the candle light could fall on her shy, flushed face. "Oh, 'tis bonnie ye're looking, lassie," he cried proudly. He raised her drooping head, so that his hungry eyes could feast on her beauty. She stood speechless, like a frightened child, not daring to raise her eyes to his. "Haven't ye a word of welcome for me, sweetheart?" he whispered tenderly, drawing her to him caressingly.

"I'm—I'm very glad to hae ye back again," she faltered softly, her sweet voice scarcely audible.

"Go an' kiss him, Mary; dinna' mind us," cried Souter impatiently. "I can see ye're both asking



for it wi' your eyes," he insinuated. And he drew near them expectantly.

"Hauld your whist, ye old tyke," flashed Mrs. Burns indignantly. "Robbie Burns doesna' need ye to tell him how to act wi' the lassies."

"I'll not dispute ye there," replied Souter dryly, winking his eye at Robert knowingly.

Robert laughed merrily as he answered, "Ye ken we're both o'er bashful before ye a'."

"Ah, ye're a fine pair of lovers, ye are," retorted Souter disgustedly, turning away.

"So the neighbors say, Souter," responded Robert gayly, giving Mary a loving little squeeze.

And surely there never was a handsomer couple, thought Mistress Burns proudly, as they stood there together. One so dark, so big and strong, the other so fair, so fragile and winsome. And so thought Gilbert Burns jealously, as he came quietly into the room. Robert went to him quickly, a smile lighting up his dark face, his hand outstretched in greeting.

"I'm o'er glad to see ye again, Gilbert," he cried impulsively, shaking his brother's limp hand.

"So ye've come back again," said Gilbert, coldly.

"Aye, like a bad penny," laughingly responded Robert. "Noo that I am burned out of my situation, I've come hame to help ye in the labors of the farm," and he pressed his brother's hand warmly.

"I fear your thoughts willna' lang be on farm-



ing," observed Gilbert sarcastically, going to the fireplace and deliberately turning his back to Robert.

"I'll struggle hard to keep them there, brother," replied Robert simply. His brother's coldness had chilled his extraordinarily sensitive nature. He walked slowly back to his seat.

"I ken ye'd rather be writin' love verses than farmin', eh, Robert?" chimed in Souter thoughtlessly.

"'Tis only a waste of time writin' poetry, my lad," sighed Mrs. Burns, shaking her head disapprovingly.

"I canna' help writin', mother," answered the lad firmly, a trifle defiantly. "For the love of poesy was born in me, and that love was fostered at your ain knee ever since my childhood days."

She sighed regretfully. "I didna' ken what seed I was sowing then, laddie," she answered thoughtfully.

"Dinna' be discouraged," cried Mary eagerly, going to him. "I've faith in ye, laddie, and in your poetry, too." She put her hand on his shoulder lovingly, as he sat beside the table, looking gloomy and dejected. "Some day," she continued, a thrill of pride in her voice, "ye'll wake to find your name on everybody's lips. You'll be rich and famous, mayhap. Who kens, ye may even become the Bard o' Scotland," she concluded in an awe-struck tone.

"Nay, Mary, I do not hope for that," replied



Robert, his dark countenance relaxing into a smile of tenderness at her wild prophecy, although in his own heart he felt conscious of superior talents.

“Waesucks,” chuckled Souter reminiscently. “Do you mind, Robbie, how, a year ago, ye riled up the community, an’ the kirk especially, over your verses called ‘Holy Willie’s Prayer’? Aye, lad, it was an able keen satire, and auld Squire Armour recognized the truth of it, for he threatened to hae ye arrested for blaspheming the kirk and the auld licht religion. He’ll ne’er forgive ye for that,” and he shook his head with conviction.

“He’s an auld Calvinistic hypocrite,” replied Robert carelessly, “and he deserved to be satirized alang wi’ the rest of the Elders. Let us hope the verses may do them and the kirk some good. They are sadly in need of reform.” Then with a gay laugh he told them a funny anecdote concerning one of the Elders, and for over an hour they listened to the rich tones of his voice as he entertained them with jest and song and story, passing quickly from one to the other, as the various emotions succeeded each other in his mind, assuming with equal ease the expression of the broadest mirth, the deepest melancholy or the most sublime emotion. They sat around him spellbound. Never had they seen him in such a changeable mood as to-night.

“And noo, laddie, tell us about your life in Irvine and Mauchline,” said Mrs. Burns.



Robert had finished his last story, and sat in meditative silence, watching the smoldering peat in the fireplace.

He hesitated for a moment. "There is little to tell, mother," he answered, not looking up, "and that little is na worth tellin'."

"I ken ye've come back no richer in pocket than when ye left," remarked Gilbert questioningly. As his brother made no answer, he continued with sarcastic irony, "But perhaps there wasna' enough work for ye there." He watched his brother's face narrowly.

"There was work enough for a'," replied Robert in a low tone, an agony of remorse in his voice. "An' I tried to fulfill faithfully the uncongenial tasks set before me, but I would sink into dreams, forgetting my surroundings, my duties, and would set me doon to put on paper the thoughts and fancies which came rushing through my brain, raging like so many devils, till they found vent in rhyme; then the conning o'er my verses like a spell soothed all into quiet again." A far away rapt expression came over his countenance as he finished, and his dark glowing eyes gazed dreamily into space, as if communing with the Muses. Mrs. Burns and Mary both watched him with moist, adoring eyes, hardly breathing lest they should disturb his reverie. Gilbert stirred in his chair restlessly.

"Ye will never prosper unless ye give up this day



dreaming," he exclaimed impatiently, rising from his chair and pacing the floor.

Robert looked up, the fire fading from his eyes, his face growing dark and forbidding. "I ken that weel, Gilbert," he answered bitterly. "An' I despair of ever makin' anything of mysel' in this world, not e'en a poor farmer. I am not formed for the bustle of the busy nor the flutter of the gay. I'm but an idle rhymster, a ne'er-do-weel." He walked quickly to the window and stood dejectedly looking out into the night.

"Nay, ye're a genius, lad," declared old Souter emphatically, patting him affectionately on the shoulder. "I havena' watched your erratic ways for nothin', an' I say ye're a genius. It's a sad thing to be a genius, Robert, an' I sympathize wi' ye," and the old hypocrite shook his head dolefully as he took his seat at the fireplace.

"I'm a failure, I ken that weel. I'm a failure," muttered Robert despairingly, his heart heavy and sad.

"Nay, laddie, ye mustna' talk like that, 'tis not right," cried Mary, bravely keeping back the sympathetic tears from her eyes and forcing a little smile to her lips. "Ye are only twenty-five," she continued earnestly. "An' all your life is stretchin' out before ye. Why, ye mustna ever think o' failure. Ye must think only of bright, happy things, and ye'll see how everythin' will come out all right.



Noo mind that. So cheer thee, laddie, or ye'll make us all sad on this your hame-comin'. Come, noo, look pleasant," and she gave his arm a loving little shake. As his stern face melted into a sad smile, she laughed happily. "That's right, laddie." With a little encouraging nod she left him, and running to Mrs. Burns, she gave her a hug and a kiss, until the old lady's grim features relaxed. Then like a bird she flitted to the other side of the room.

"Souter Johnny," she saucily cried, "how dare ye look so mournful like. Hae ye a fit o' the gloom, man?"

"Not a bit o' it," retorted Souter energetically, jumping lightly to his feet. "Will I stand on my head for ye, Mary, eh?"

Mary laughed merrily as Mrs. Burns replied in scathing tones, "Your brains are in your boots, noo, Souter Johnny."

"Weel, wherever they are," responded Souter with a quizzical smile, "they dinna' trouble me o'er much. Weel, I think I'll be turnin' in noo," he continued, stretching himself lazily. "Good-night to ye all," and taking a candle from the dresser, he slowly left the room.

"Come, lads, 'tis bedtime," admonished Mrs. Burns, glancing at the old high clock that stood in the corner. "Mary, ye shall sleep with me, and, Robert, ye know where to find your bed. It hasna' been slept in since ye left. Dinna' forget your



candle, Gilbert," she called out as he started for the door. He silently took it from her hand. "Dinna' forget your promise," she whispered anxiously to him as he left the room in gloomy silence.

The look on his face frightened her. There was bitterness and despair in the quick glance he gave the happy lovers, who were standing in the shadow of the deep window. "The lad looked fair heart-broken," she mused sorrowfully. For a moment she looked after him, a puzzled frown on her brow. Then suddenly the truth dawned on her. How blind she had been, why hadn't she thought of that before? The lad was in love. In love with Mary Campbell, that was the cause of his bitterness toward his brother. "Both in love with the same lass," she murmured apprehensively, and visions of petty mean-nesses, bitter discords, between the two brothers, jealous quarrels, resulting in bloody strife, perhaps; and she shuddered at the mental picture her uneasy mind had conjured up. The sooner Robert and Mary were married the sooner peace would be restored, she thought resolutely. They could start out for themselves, go to Auld Ayr or to Dumfries. They couldn't be much worse off there than here. And determined to set her mind easy before she retired, she walked briskly toward the couple, who now sat hand in hand, oblivious to earthly surroundings, the soft moonlight streaming full upon their happy upturned faces. She watched them a moment in si-



lence, loath to break in upon their sweet communion. Presently she spoke.

“Robert,” she called softly, “ye’d better gang to your bed noo, lad.”

With a start he came back to earth, and jumping up boyishly, replied with a happy laugh, “I forgot, mother, that I was keeping ye and Mary from your rest.” He glanced toward the recessed bed in the wall where his mother was wont to sleep. “Good-night, mither, good-night, Mary,” he said lovingly. Then taking his candle, he started for the door, but turned as his mother called his name and looked at her questioningly.

“Laddie, dinna’ think I’m meddling in your affairs,” she said hesitatingly, “but I’m fair curious to know when ye an’ Mary will be wed.”

Robert looked inquiringly at Mary, who blushed and dropped her head. “Before harvest begins, mither,” he answered hopefully, “if Mary will be ready and willing. Will that suit ye, lassie?” And he looked tenderly at the drooping head, covered with its wealth of soft, glittering curls.

“I hae all my linen spun and woven,” she faltered, after a nervous silence, not daring to look at him. “Ye ken the lassies often came a rockin’ and so helped me get it done.” She raised her head and looked in his glowing face. “’Tis a very small dowry I’ll be bringin’ ye, laddie,” she added in pathetic earnestness.

He gave a little contented laugh. “Ye’re bring-



in' me yoursel', dearie," he murmured tenderly. "What mair could any lad want. I ken I do not deserve such a bonnie sweet sonsie lassie for my wife." He looked away thoughtfully for a moment. Then he continued with glowing eyes, "But ye mind the verse o' the song I gave ye before I went awa'?" he said lovingly, taking her hand in his. His voice trembled with feeling as he fervently recited the lines:

"We have plighted our troth, my Mary,  
In mutual affection to join,  
And cursed be the cause that shall part us,  
The hour and moment o' time."

She smiled confidingly up into his radiant face, then laid her little head against his breast like a tired child. "Always remember, sweetheart," he continued softly, as if in answer to that look, "that Robbie Burns' love for his Highland Mary will remain forever the tenderest, truest passion of his unworthy life."



## CHAPTER V

LIFE at Mossgiel passed uneventfully and monotonously. Robert had settled down with every appearance of contentment to the homely duties of the farmer, and Gilbert could find no fault with the amount of labor done. Morning till night he plowed and harrowed the rocky soil, without a word of complaint, although the work was very hard and laborious. Planting had now begun and his tasks were materially lightened. He had ample leisure to indulge in his favorite pastime; and that he failed to take advantage of his opportunities for rhyming was a mystery to Gilbert, and a source of endless regret to Mary. But his mother could tell of the many nights she had seen the candle light gleaming far into the night; and her heart was sore troubled when in the morning she would see the evidence of his midnight toil, scraps of closely written paper scattered in wild disorder over his small table, but she held her peace. The lad loved to do it, she mused tenderly, and so long as he was not shirking his work, why disturb his tranquillity?

A few weeks after the return of our hero Mary and Mrs. Burns were seated in the living-room, Mrs. Burns as usual busy at her wheel, while Mary



sat sewing at the window, where she could look out across the fields and see her sweetheart, who, with a white sheet containing his seed corn slung across his shoulder, was scattering the grain in the earth. She sang dreamily as she sewed, her sweet face beaming with love and happiness. No presentiment warned her of the approaching tragedy that was soon to cast its blighting shadow over that happy household—a tragedy that was inevitable. The guilty one had sown to the flesh, he must reap corruption. The seed had been sown carelessly, recklessly, and now the harvest time had come, and such a harvest! The pity of it was that the grim reaper must with his devouring sickle ruthlessly cut down such a tender, sweet, and innocent flower as she who sat there so happy and so blissfully unconscious of her impending doom.

Suddenly, with an exclamation of astonishment, she jumped excitedly to her feet. “Mistress Burns,” she cried breathlessly, “here are grand lookin’ strangers comin’ up the path. City folk, too, I ken. Look.”

Hastily the good dame ran to the window. “Sure as death, Mary; they’re comin’ here,” she cried in amazement. “Oh, lack a day, an’ I’m na dressed to receive the gentry.” A look of comical dismay clouded her anxious face as she hurriedly adjusted her cap and smoothed out her apron. “Is my cap on straight, Mary?” she nervously inquired. Mary



nodded her head reassuringly. "Oh, dear, whatever can they want?" Steps sounded without. "Ye open the door, Mary," she whispered sibilantly as the peremptory knock sounded loudly through the room. Timidly Mary approached the door. "Hist, wait," called Mrs. Burns in sudden alarm. "My 'kerchief isna' pinned." Hastily she pinned the loose end in place, then folding her hands, she said firmly, "Noo let them enter." Mary slowly opened the door, which, swinging inward, concealed her from the three strangers, who entered with ill-concealed impatience on the part of the two ladies who were being laughingly chided by their handsome escort. With a wondering look of admiration at the richly dressed visitors, Mary quietly stole out and softly shut the door behind her.

With a murmur of disgust the younger of the two ladies, who was about nineteen, walked to the fireplace, and raising her quilted blue petticoat, which showed beneath the pale pink overdress with its Watteau plait, she daintily held her foot to the blaze. A disfiguring frown marred the dark beauty of her face as her bold black eyes gazed about her impatiently.

"It's a monstrous shame," she flashed angrily, "to have an accident happen within a few miles of home. Will it delay us long, think you?" she inquired anxiously, addressing her companion.

"It depends on the skill of the driver to repair



the injury," replied the other lady indifferently. She appeared the elder of the two by some few years, and was evidently a lady of rank and fashion. She looked distinctly regal and commanding in her large Gainsborough hat tilted on one side of her elaborately dressed court wig. A look of amused curiosity came over her patrician face as she calmly surveyed the interior of the cottage. She inclined her head graciously to Mrs. Burns, who with a deep courtesy stood waiting their pleasure.

"We have just met with an accident, guidwife," laughingly said the gentleman, who stood in the doorway brushing the dust from his long black cloak. He was a scholarly looking man of middle age, dressed in the height of taste and fashion. "While crossing the old bridge yonder," he continued, smiling courteously at Mrs. Burns, "our coach had the misfortune to cast a wheel, spilling us all willy-nilly, on the ground, and we must crave your hospitality, guidwife."

"Ye are a' welcome," quickly answered Mrs. Burns with another courtesy. "Sit doon, please," and she placed a chair for the lady, who languidly seated herself thereon with a low murmur of thanks.

"Allow me to introduce myself," continued the gentleman, coming into the room, his cloak over his arm. "I am Lord Glencairn of Edinburgh. This is Lady Glencairn, and yonder lady is Mistress Jean Armour of Mauchline."



The young lady in question, who was still standing by the fireplace, flashed him a look of decided annoyance. She seemed greatly perturbed at the enforced delay of the journey. She started violently as she heard Mrs. Burns say, "And I am Mrs. Burns, your lordship." Then she hurried to the old lady's side, a startled look in her flashing eyes.

"Mistress Burns of Mossgiel Farm?" she inquired in a trembling voice.

"Yes, my lady," replied Mrs. Burns. The young lady's face went white as she walked nervously back to the fireplace.

"My dear Jean, whatever is the matter?" asked Lady Glencairn lazily, as she noticed Jean's perturbation. "Is there anything in the name of Burns to frighten you?"

"No, your ladyship," replied Jean falteringly, turning her face away so that her large Gainsborough hat completely shielded her quivering features. "I—I am still a trifle nervous from the upset, that is all." She seemed strangely agitated.

"Was it not unlucky?" replied Lady Glencairn in her rich vibrating contralto. "'Twill be a most wearisome wait, I fear, but we simply must endure it with the best possible grace," and she unfastened her long cloak of black velvet and threw it off her shoulders, revealing her matchless form in its tightly fitting gown of amber satin, with all its alluring lines and sinuous curves, to the utmost advantage.



"It willna' be long noo, your ladyship," replied Mrs. Burns, smiling complacently. She had quietly left the room while the two were talking, and seeing Souter hovering anxiously around, trying to summon up courage to enter, she had commanded him to go to the fields and tell the lads of the accident, which he had reluctantly done.

"My lads will soon fix it for ye," she continued proudly. "Robert is a very handy lad, ye ken. He is my eldest son, who has just returned from Mauchline," she explained loquaciously in answer to Lord Glencairn's questioning look.

Jean nervously clutched at the neck of her gown, her face alternately flushing and paling. "Your son is here now?" she asked eagerly, turning to Mrs. Burns.

"Aye, he's out yonder in the fields," she answered simply.

"Oh, then you know the young man?" interrogated Lady Glencairn, glancing sharply at Jean.

"Yes, I know him," she answered with averted gaze. "We met occasionally in Mauchline at dancing school, where we fell acquainted."

Lady Glencairn looked at her with half-closed eyes for a moment, then she smilingly said, "And I'll wager your love for coquetting prompted you to make a conquest of the innocent rustic, eh, Jean?"

Jean tossed her head angrily and walked to the window.



"Lady Glencairn, you are pleased to jest," she retorted haughtily.

"There, there, Jean, you're over prudish. I vow 'twould be no crime," her ladyship calmly returned. "I'll wager this young farmer was a gay Lothario while in Mauchline," she continued mockingly.

"Oh, no, your ladyship," interrupted Mrs. Burns simply. "He was a flax dresser."

"Truly a more respectable occupation, madame," gravely responded Lord Glencairn with a suspicious twinkle in his eye.

"Thank ye, my lord," answered Mrs. Burns with a deep courtesy. "My lad is a good lad, if I do say so, and he has returned to us as pure minded as when he went awa' a year ago."

Lady Glencairn raised her delicately arched eyebrows in amused surprise. Turning to Jean, she murmured drily, "And away from home a year, too! He must be a model of virtue, truly."

Jean gazed at her with startled eyes. "Can she suspect aught?" she asked herself fearfully.

"Could I be getting ye a cup of milk?" asked Mrs. Burns hospitably. "'Tis a' I have to offer, but 'tis cool and refreshing."

"Fresh milk," repeated Lady Glencairn, rising with delight. "I vow it would be most welcome, guid-wife."

"Indeed it would," responded her husband. And Mrs. Burns with a gratified smile hurried from the room.



"My dear, don't look so tragic," drawled Lady Glencairn carelessly, as she noticed Jean's pale face and frightened eyes. "We'll soon be in Mauchline. Although why you are in such a monstrous hurry to reach that lonesome village after your delightful sojourn in the capital, is more than I can conjecture," and her keen eyes noted with wonder the flush mount quickly to the girl's cheek.

"It is two months since I left my home, your ladyship," faltered Jean hesitatingly. "It's only natural I should be anxious to see my dear parents again." She dropped her eyes quickly before her ladyship's penetrating gaze.

"Dear parents, indeed," sniffed Lady Glencairn to herself suspiciously as she followed their hostess to the door of the "ben."

With a nervous little laugh Jean rose quickly from her chair by the window and walked toward the door through which they had entered. "The accident has quite upset me, Lady Glencairn," she said constrainedly. "Would you mind if I stroll about the fields until my nerves are settled?" she asked with a forced laugh.

"No, child, go by all means," replied her ladyship indolently. "The air will do you good, no doubt."

"I warn you not to wander too far from the house," interposed Lord Glencairn with a kindly smile. "We will not be detained much longer."



With a smile of thanks she hastily left the room just as Mrs. Burns entered from the "ben" bearing a large blue pitcher filled with foaming milk, which she placed on the table before her smiling visitors.

Jean breathed a sigh of relief as she closed the door behind her. She felt in another moment she would have screamed aloud in her nervousness. That fate should have brought her to the very home of the man she had thought still in Mauchline, and to see whom she had hurriedly left Edinburgh, filled her with wonder and dread. "I must see him before we leave," she said nervously, clasping and unclasping her hands. But where should she find him? She walked quickly down the path and gazed across the fields, where in the distance she could see several men at work, repairing the disabled coach. Anxiously she strained her eyes to see if the one she sought was among them, but he was not there. Quickly she retraced her steps. "I must find him. I must speak with him this day," she said determinedly. As she neared the cottage she turned aside and walked toward the high stone fence which enclosed the house and yard. Swiftly mounting the old stile, she looked about her. Suddenly she gave a sharp little exclamation, and her heart bounded violently, for there before her, coming across the field, was the man she sought, his hands clasped behind him, his head bent low in the deepest meditation. With a sigh of relief she sank down on the step and calmly awaited his approach.



## CHAPTER VI

ROBERT flung the last of his seed corn into the earth with a sigh of thankfulness, for though he gave the powers of his body to the labors of the farm, he refused to bestow on them his thoughts or his cares. He longed to seek the quiet of his attic room, for his soul was bursting with song and his nervous fingers fairly itched to grasp his pencil and catch and hold forever the pearls dropped from the lap of the Goddess Muse into his worshipful soul, ere they faded and dissolved into lusterless fragments. Mechanically he turned his footsteps toward the cottage, plunged in deep reverie. As he walked slowly along his mind suddenly reverted to the year he had spent in Mauchline. It had been his first taste of town life. Blessed with a strong appetite for sociability, although constitutionally melancholy, and a hair-brained imagination, he had become an immediate favorite and welcome guest wherever he visited. *Vive l'amour* and *vive la bagatelle* had soon become his sole principle of action. His heart, which was completely tinder, was eternally lighted up by some goddess or other, and it was not long before he regarded illicit love with levity, which two months previously he had thought of with horror. Poesy was still a darling walk for his



mind, but it was only indulged in according to the humor of the hour. Having no aim in life he had been easily led from the paths of virtue into many forms of dissipation, which, when indulged in, afterwards plunged him into the deepest melancholy. A few months after his advent into the village he had met Jean Armour, the daughter of a master builder. She was one of the belles of Mauchline, a wild, willful, imprudent lass, whose sensual charms soon ensnared the susceptible heart of the unsophisticated farmer lad. The fatal defect of his character was the comparative weakness of his volition, and his passions, once lighted up, soon carried him down the stream of error and swept him over the precipice he saw directly in his course.

Such being their temperaments, it was not to be wondered at when their procedure soon became decidedly irregular, their intimacy becoming the common talk and gossip of Mauchline.

A few months before Robert returned to Mossgiel farm Jean had received an invitation from her god-parents, Lord and Lady Glencairn, to visit Edinburgh, which she had accepted with eagerness, for she was becoming tired of her latest conquest and longed for the gay life of the capital.

Robert saw her leave Mauchline with no pangs of regret at her inconstancy and caprice. He was in a state of profound melancholy at the time, the thoughts of how he had fallen from the paths of



truth and virtue, the thoughts of the pure love of his sweetheart at home, filling his heart with grief and remorse. He was thinking of all this as he approached the stile. How wretchedly weak and sinful he had been to forget his sworn vows to Mary, he thought remorsefully. "May no harping voice from that past ever come to disturb her peace of mind," he prayed fervently.

Jean watched him, drawing ever nearer, with eyes filled with sudden shame and dread at what she had to tell him. Why had her brief infatuation for the poverty-stricken farmer led her into such depths of imprudence and recklessness? she thought angrily. As he reached the bottom of the stile she softly spoke his name, and noted with chagrin his startled look of surprise and annoyance as he raised his eyes to hers.

"Jean Armour?" he cried in amazement.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" she asked coquettishly, his presence exercising its old fascination for her.

"What has brought ye to Mossgiel?" he asked abruptly, ignoring her outstretched hand.

"An accident," she replied flippantly. "I was on my way home and would have been there ere this had it not been for a fortunate mishap."

"Fortunate mishap?" he repeated questioningly.

"Yes," she retorted amiably, "otherwise I should have missed seeing you," and she smiled down into his pale startled face.



"I dinna understand why ye left Edinburgh," he began, when she interrupted him.

"Because I thought you were still in Mauchline," she explained quickly. He look at her questioningly. "I left Edinburgh for the sole purpose of seeing you, Robert," she announced quietly, making room for him to sit beside her, but he did not accept the invitation.

"Well, noo, that was very kind of ye, Jean," he replied a little uneasily. "But I'm not so conceited as to believe that. I ken the charms o' Edinburgh town, with its handsome officers, soon made ye forget the quiet country village, and a' your old flames, including your bashful humble servant," and he made her a mocking bow.

His tone of satirical raillery made her wince. "Forget?" she cried passionately, jumping to her feet. "I wish to heaven I might forget everything, but I cannot—I cannot." The sudden thought of her predicament caused her haughty, rebellious spirit to quail, and covering her face with her hands, she burst into a paroxysm of tears and sank heavily down upon the step.

He regarded the weeping woman silently. Was her attachment for him stronger than he had believed? Could it be possible she still entertained a passion for him? he asked himself anxiously. But no, that couldn't be; she had left him two months ago with a careless word of farewell on her laughing lips. Yet why these tears, these wild words she had just uttered?



A wave of pity for her swept over him as he realized, if such were the case, that he must repulse her advances gently but none the less firmly. He had done with her forever when he said his last farewell. There could be no raking over of the dead ashes.

Jean angrily wiped away her tears. She must not give way to such weakness. She had an errand to perform which would need all her courage. He was evidently waiting for some explanation of her strange behavior, she told herself with a vain effort to steel her heart. Now was the time to tell him all, she thought fearfully, peeking out from behind her small linen 'kerchief, with which she was dabbing her eyes, at his cold, wondering face. The sooner it was done the sooner she would know what to expect at his hands. How should she begin? After a long, nervous pause she faltered out, "Have you forgotten the past, Robert, and all that we were to each other?"

"Nay, Jean, I remember everything," he answered remorsefully. "But let us not speak of that noo, please. Ye ken that is all ended between us forever." He turned away pale and trembling, for her presence, her looks and words recalled many things he wanted to forget, that shamed him to remember.

"Ended?" she repeated, an angry flush rising to the roots of her black hair. She looked at him in amazement. He, the poverty-stricken farmer, had repulsed her, the belle of Mauchline? Could she have heard aright? He who had always been at her beck



and call, two months ago her willing slave, could it be that he was over his infatuation for her? She had not thought of that possibility. She had expected him to be humble, gratefully flattered by her condescension in seeking him out. If he should refuse the proposal she had come so far to make! she thought in trepidation. "He must not refuse, he shall not refuse," and her face grew hard and set. But perhaps he was piqued because she had left him so unceremoniously two months ago, because she had not written him. Her tense lips relaxed into a smile. Oh, well, she would be nice to him now; she would make him think she was breaking her heart for him, work on his sympathy, then perhaps it would not be necessary to confess her humiliating plight. No farmer doomed to lifelong poverty would be averse to winning the hand of the daughter of the rich Squire Armour. These thoughts, running through her mind, decided her next move, and with a fluttering sigh she rose from her seat and descended the step. She drew close to him and looking languishingly up into his face, murmured, "Why should it be ended, Robert? I love you just the same as I did in the past," and she threw her arms about his neck, clinging to him passionately. "You do love me a little, tell me you do."

"Jean, ye must be daft," he panted, vainly trying to disengage himself from her embrace.

But she continued softly, alluringly, "Think of



the old days, when I lay in your arms like this, Robbie. Think of those happy hours we spent together on the banks of the Doon. You were not cold to me then. Oh, let us live them all over again. How happy we will be. Kiss me, Rob," and she lifted her flushed, piquant face, her crimson lips pursed temptingly, close to his. The warmth of her seductive body, the white bare arms in their short sleeves, which embraced his neck, the half-closed passionate eyes gazing invitingly, languorously into his own, fired his naturally ardent blood, making his senses to reel from the contact. Slowly his arms, which had been restraining her amorous embrace, tightened their hold on her, drawing her closer and closer, while the drops of sweat poured down his white, yielding face, as with wild bloodshot eyes he battled with the temptations which beset him so wantonly, so dangerously. With a thrill of elation not unmixed with desire she felt him yielding to her embrace, and knew that she had won him again. With a cooing cry of delight she was about to press her warm lips to his, when suddenly a bird-like voice singing in the distance arrested her impulse.

"Oh where and oh where is my Highland laddie gone?"

rang out the voice of the singer plaintively. With a cry of brief and horror Robert tore the clinging arms from about his neck and threw her madly from him.



"What is the matter, Robert?" she cried fearfully, looking at him in amazement.

"I think ye had better go noo, Jean," he answered harshly, not looking at her. "'Twill be best for us both. Oh, how I despise my weakness, I had no right, no right noo." And there was an agony of shame and remorse in his voice.

"Do you mean," she asked white with rage. "That you are not free to do as you like?" He remained silent a moment.

Then his face grew calm and peaceful. "The lass whom ye hear singing is Mary Campbell, my betrothed wife," he answered simply. "We are to be married when the plantin' is done. We have been sweethearts for years, and if I have in my weakness forgotten my sworn vows to her, by God's help I'll strive to be more faithful in the future." His voice vibrated with intense feeling as he made the resolution. Then he continued softly and tenderly, "And the love I bear my faithful Mary will never cease as long as this crimson current flows within me." A mocking laugh greeted his words as he finished.

"I tell you, Robert Burns," cried Jean threateningly, "she shall never be your wife, for I will——" But the angry words died suddenly on her lips at an unlooked-for interruption.

"Jean, Jean," called a lazy voice. Turning quickly she saw with apprehension Lady Glencairn standing in the open doorway of the cottage, beckon-



ing leisurely to her. Had she heard her imprudent words? she asked herself in terror. But no, that were not possible. She had not raised her voice. For a moment she hesitated, not knowing what to do. Should she tell him the truth now? It would only mean a hurriedly whispered word or two, but as she looked at him standing there so proudly erect, the angry, puzzled flush which her last hasty words had occasioned still mantling his swarthy face, she felt her courage slipping away from her. Why not wait and write him? she temporized; that would be much better than creating a scene now, with the sharp eye of Lady Glencairn fastened upon them. Yes, she would do that, she decided hastily. She turned calmly and mounted the stile and without one backward glance descended to the other side. "Are you coming?" she asked indifferently over her shoulder, and without waiting for his answer walked quickly toward the house. Robert after a moment's indecision gravely followed her, the look of puzzled concern still wrinkling his forehead.

"Oh, I beg your pardon; I didn't know you were indulging in a tête-à-tête," said Lady Glencairn frigidly as they reached the door.

"Lady Glencairn, this is Mr. Robert Burns," stammered Jean nervously, with a flush of embarrassment at her ladyship's sarcastic smile.

"Oh, indeed, delighted I'm sure," said her ladyship, with a careless nod, which changed to surprised



interest as Robert with simple, manly dignity removed his Tam O'Shanter and bowed low before the haughty beauty. "What an air for a peasant," she mused. "What dignity," and she surveyed him critically from the top of his head, with its black clustering locks which gleamed purple in the sunshine, to the tip of his rough leather brogans; noting with admiration his stalwart frame, the well-shaped head and massive neck, the strength suggested in the broad shoulders, the deep chest, the herculean limbs with the swelling muscles displayed to such advantage within the tightly fitting breeches of doe skin. "What a handsome creature," she thought with a thrill of admiration, as she took the mental inventory of his good points. "And decidedly interesting, I'll wager, if not dangerous," she added, smiling contemplatively as she caught the look of respectful admiration which gleamed in his wonderfully magnetic eyes.

"Oh, James," she called languidly reëntering the room, "here is the young man who has so kindly assisted in repairing the coach—the young man who has just returned from Mauchline," she added significantly.

"Nay, your ladyship, 'tis my brother Gilbert you must thank for his assistance, not me," replied Robert, flushing. As the deep tones of his sonorous voice fell on her ear she felt an indefinable thrill of emotion steal over her that startled her. She looked at him



wonderingly. What peculiar magnetism was there in this farmer's voice that could so easily move her, who had always prided herself on her coldness, her indifference to all men, including her husband, who was blissfully unconscious of his beautiful wife's sentiments regarding him?

"Your brother had no easy task, I fear, Mr. Burns," remarked Lord Glencairn genially. Then he turned smilingly to Jean, who was standing impatiently in the doorway. "What have you been doing all this time, my dear Jean?" he asked lightly.

"Ask Mr. Burns," insinuated Lady Glencairn with an odd little smile at Jean's embarrassed countenance. He looked inquiringly at the surprised face of the young farmer.

"Miss Armour has done me the honor of listening to some of my rhyming," quietly replied Robert with a quick glance at Jean, his ready wit coming to her rescue.

"So then you are a poet," murmured Lady Glencairn, with a smile. "Do you write love sonnets to your sweethearts, or does the muse incline at this season to songs of springtime?"

"Aye, my lady, he has the gift indeed," spoke up Mrs. Burns deprecatingly. "But I dinna' ken if it amounts to aught."

"My mother doesna' care for my poetry," said Robert simply, turning to her ladyship.

"Dinna' say that, laddie," replied his mother



earnestly. "Ye ken I'm o'er fond of those verses to Highland Mary, but——"

"'Highland Mary'? what a dear name," interrupted Lady Glencairn sweetly, smiling at Robert. "Who is she, may I ask?" and she leaned forward questioningly in her chair.

"She is a—a friend," he replied, flushing to the roots of his hair. Then he continued, softly, his eyes lighting up with love and devotion, "An' she is as sweet and fragrant as a sprig of pure white heather plucked from her native Highlands."

"Aye, and she'll make a fine wife for Robert," added Mrs. Burns complacently.

"Aye, finer than I deserve, mither," he replied, looking uneasily at Jean, who had started violently, then quickly leaned back against the door post, pale and trembling.

"Marry her? Never! He cannot, he must not," she muttered to herself, frantically.

"Why, Jean!" cried Lady Glencairn, going to her in sudden alarm. "What ails you, why do you look so wild?"

"I—I'm—a pain gripped my heart most suddenly," she faltered. "I find it over warm here," she gasped. "I'll await you without," and she left the room, a strange, frightened look on her pale face.

With a puzzled frown Lady Glencairn turned and sank thoughtfully into a chair. Looking up sud-



denly, she caught Robert's eye fastened upon her face in eager scrutiny. "Let me see, what were we speaking about?" she inquired indifferently.

"Ye were kind enough to ask me about my poetry," answered Rob quietly. Jean's queer behavior troubled him. What did it all mean? He feared she had aroused suspicion in her ladyship's mind.

"Oh, to be sure, and I vow I'm curious," she replied brightly. "I should like to read one of your poems, Mr. Burns, if you have one at hand."

"He has bushels of them in the attic, your ladyship," eagerly spoke Mrs. Burns.

"Aye, mother," laughed Robert, "all waiting for the publisher. Here is one I but this day scribbled off, if—if ye really care to read it," he added bashfully, taking a scrap of paper from the pocket of his loose shirt and handing it to Lady Glencairn.

She took it with a smile of amused indifference. A farmer and a poet! the idea was absurd. With an almost imperceptibly sarcastic lifting of her delicate eyebrows she read the title, "'Flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes.'" Then she read the verse in growing wonder and astonishment. She had thought to please him with a word of praise, even if they were laughably commonplace and prosaic; but it was with genuine enthusiasm that she heartily cried, "Really, 'tis a gem, Mr. Burns, so charming withal, such beautiful sentiment, and writ in most excellent



style. Read it, James," and she handed it to Lord Glencairn, who carefully perused it with apparent delight in its rhythmic beauty of composition.

"Thank ye, my lady," replied Robert, flushing. "Your praise is o'er sweet to my hungry ear." She gazed at him in open admiration.

"Here, Robert, are some more," cried Mrs. Burns, entering the room with a box, which she placed before her son. "Show his lordship these, laddie," and she hovered nervously around, her face flushed with excitement, watching anxiously every look and expression that passed over the faces of their guests.

Robert opened the box and selected a few of the poems at random, which he handed to Lord Glencairn without a word.

"'A man's a man for a' that,' 'Willie brewed a peck of malt,' 'Holy Willie's Prayer,' 'The Lass of Balbehmyle,'" read Lord Glencairn slowly, glancing over their titles. Then he read them through earnestly, his noble face expressing the interest he felt; then with a sigh of pleasure he passed them to Lady Glencairn, who devoured the written pages eagerly, her face flushed and radiant. When she had finished, she leaned back in her chair and fixed her luminous eyes upon her husband's beaming face.

"James," said she decidedly, "you will please me well if you will influence some publisher to accept this young man's poems and place them before the public. I'm sure he is most deserving, and—he interests me



greatly." There was a peculiar glitter in her half-closed eyes as she gazed intently at Robert with an enigmatic smile parting her red lips. The gracious lady with her high-bred air, her alluring smile, her extreme condescension, was a revelation to the country-bred lad, who was brought in close contact for the first time with one so far above his station in life. He felt his awkwardness more than he had ever thought possible as he felt her critical eyes fastened upon him and heard her honeyed words of praise and encouragement.

"Mr. Burns," said his lordship earnestly, "your poems interest me greatly, and I declare such genius as you display should be given an opportunity to develop. It will afford me much pleasure to take these verses, with your permission, back with me to Edinburgh and submit them to Sir William Creech, who is the largest publisher there, and a personal friend of mine, and if he accepts these poems as a criterion of your artistic ability, without the least doubt your success will be at once assured." He put them carefully in the large wallet he had taken from an inside pocket while he was talking, and replaced it within his coat.

Robert looked at him, hardly daring to believe his ears. "I—I canna find words to express my unbounded gratitude to you, my lord," he faltered, his voice low and shaking.

"I'd advise you to make a collection of your



poems, my lad," continued Lord Glencairn quietly, touched by the sight of Robert's expressive features, which he was vainly trying to control. "Chiefly those in the Scottish dialect; they are new and will create a sensation. Have them ready to forward to town when sent for." There was a tense silence for a moment when he had finished.

Robert dared not trust his voice to speak, to utter his thanks. Finally he burst out. "My lord, how can I ever thank ye for this unlooked-for generosity to an absolute stranger!" he cried brokenly. "For years I have been praying for a publisher to edit my songs, but I could see no silver lining to the dark clouds of obscurity hanging over my unhappy, friendless head, clouds which threatened to engulf me in their maddening embrace. But now," he continued eloquently, his voice ringing with gladness, "the bright sunlight is peeping around the fast disappearing cloud, warming my very soul with its joyous rays. Oh, my lord, if ever the name of Robert Burns should e'en become familiar to his countrymen, 'twill be through your graciousness, your benevolence, to a poor unknown, humble plowman," and his eyes filled with tears of love and gratitude for his noble benefactor.

Lord Glencairn took a pinch of snuff from the small oblong box he held in his hand, and used his handkerchief vigorously to conceal the tears of sympathy which had welled up in his eyes as he listened



to the recital of Robert's ambitions, his hopes and fears.

"My dear lad," he said, trying to speak lightly, "I have done nothing as yet to deserve such fulsome words of thanks. 'Tis but a trifling thing I propose doing, and it pleases me, else perhaps I might not trouble myself to speak in your behalf."

"Ah, noo, sir," cried Mrs. Burns, wiping away the tears of joy, "'tis your big, noble heart which prompts ye to assist a struggling genius to something better, higher, and nobler in this life. God bless ye for it."

The door opened, and Gilbert Burns quietly entered the room. Removing his Tam O'Shanter, he bowed respectfully to Lord Glencairn and said briefly, "Your Lordship's coach is repaired."

With a word of thanks Lord Glencairn rose and assisted his wife into her cloak.

"Thank goodness we can proceed on our journey while it is yet light," she said animatedly, going to the door.

"I assure you, Mistress Burns, we have enjoyed your hospitality amazing well," said Lord Glencairn, turning to their hostess. "Believe me, we'll not forget it."

They left the house, followed by their admiring hosts. Suddenly Lady Glencairn gave a little cry of delighted surprise as her eyes rested on the drooping figure of Highland Mary, sitting disconsolately



on a large rock beside the old well. "What a sweet, pretty flower of a lass!" she cried enthusiastically. "Come here, child," she called aloud. Mary looked up quickly with a little gasp of surprise, for she had not noticed them come out. She rose bashfully to her feet and stood hesitating, her eyes timidly fixed on a piece of heather she was holding in her hand.

Lady Glencairn laughed amusedly. "I vow 'tis an uncommon modest shy wildflower truly," she said to her husband. "Come here, child, I'll not bite you," and she held out her hands toward the wondering girl.

With a little silvery, timid laugh Mary walked quickly toward her. "I'm no afraid, my lady," she replied quietly, but her heart was beating very fast, nevertheless, as she stood before the great lady, who was watching the flower-like face, with the delicate pink color coming and going, with such apparent admiration.

"That's our Highland Mary," triumphantly cried Souter, who had just come upon the scene.

"Oh, indeed," replied her ladyship brightly. "So you are Highland Mary."

"Yes, my lady," answered Mary with a quaint little courtesy.

"Isn't she a dear," said Lady Glencairn aloud to her husband.

She turned to Robert, who was proudly watching Mary, with eyes aglow with love and happiness. "No



wonder, Mr. Burns," she said, a sigh involuntarily escaping her as she noted his rapt gaze, "that you have sought to portray in song and verse the sweet loveliness of this fair maiden." Then she turned suddenly to Mary.

"You're a very pretty child," she said carelessly. "But I suppose you know that well ere this." She laughed cynically and turned away.

"She isna used to such compliments, your ladyship," said Robert, noticing the embarrassed blush that mounted to Mary's cheek. "She's o'er shy, ye ken."

"That's the kind we raise in the Highlands," declared Souter with a satisfied air.

"Come, James, it grows late," wearily said Lady Glencairn, taking her husband's arm. "And here is the coach." As the vehicle with its prancing black horses champing restlessly at their bits drew up to the gate, she turned to Mary and said condescendingly, "Good-by, child; I suppose some day, when Mr. Burns is the Bard of Scotland, we'll see you in town with him. Be sure to come and see me at Glencairn Hall."

"Thank ye, my lady," replied Mary, courtesying deeply, fortunately not discerning the sarcasm in the tired tones of the great lady's voice.

Lord Glencairn helped her into the coach, and then turned to Robert with outstretched hand. "My lad," he said cordially, "you may expect to hear



from me or Sir William Creech very shortly. Good-by."

"Good-by, sir," replied Robert, "and may Heaven bless you."

"Oh, Lud," cried Lady Glencairn as they were about to start, "we're forgetting Jean."

"The young lady strolled along," answered Gilbert quietly. "She said you would overtake her on the road."

Lady Glencairn thanked him with a careless nod, and then leaned far out of the door to Robert. "Remember, Mr. Burns," she said softly, pressing his hand, "I expect to see you in Edinburgh very soon, don't forget," and with another lingering look, full of meaning, she withdrew into the coach, and soon they were gone in a cloud of dust, while he stood there gazing after them like one in a dream with the last rays of the setting sun lighting up his dark, passionate face.

"Hurra! 'tis luck ye're in, laddie," shouted Souter in his ear. "The gentry have noticed ye. Ye should be dancing for joy, mon. I'm off to tell the lads of your good fortune," and away he sped to the village, eager as any old gossip to spread the glorious news.

"Isna it all like a dream, Mary?" sighed Mrs. Burns rapturously, leading the way into the house, followed by the two lovers, who entered hand in hand and seated themselves in blissful silence on the high-



backed settle under the window, their favorite seat. For a few moments they sat motionless, regarding each other with moist eyes. It almost seemed too good to be true. In a few weeks perhaps Robert would be a great man, thought Mary proudly. "Weel, I always did have faith in Robert's poetry," suddenly declared Mrs. Burns with conviction.

Robert smiled at his mother's words. "They would all say that now," he thought, but without bitterness, for it was only the way of the world after all.

"Ye'll soon hae riches noo," said Mary happily.

"Aye, then ye shall hae a fine new gown, and—and we will be married noo, instead of waiting," answered Robert, taking her tenderly in his arms.

"'Tis a bonnie, bonnie pair ye make," said Mrs. Burns lovingly. "May God bless ye," and she softly stole away, leaving them to their feast of love.





“Slipped quickly behind an old beech tree.”







## CHAPTER VII

JEAN left the house filled with terrified dismay. Robert going to marry another? then what would become of her? She would be disgraced and ruined. The thought drove her frantic. "He shall not marry her; he shall give me the protection of his name, for the time being at least," she said to herself angrily. Afterward, the marriage could be easily annulled; she did not want him. She did not want to be tied for life to any farmer, not she. She would then return to Edinburgh. But suppose he would not consent to such an arrangement? Well she would scare him into it. He was as much to blame as she was anyway. She would not wait to write him after all; she would tell him now. There was nothing to fear. She would wait until the others had started, then come back and force her claim. If they went on without her, it did not matter much; it was not far to the Inn, she mused determinedly. She stopped in her rapid walk and retraced her steps. As she neared the cottage the door opened and her god-parents came out, and with them were Robert and the others. Before they could perceive her, however, she slipped quickly behind an old beech tree back of the well and nearest the house. Breathlessly, impatiently, she waited while



they talked, and talked, till she thought they would never go. Then when the coach came and the attendant excitement of its departure, like a guilty creature she stole noiselessly across the intervening space to the cottage, slipped through the open door, and hid herself behind the fireplace, where Mary had concealed herself some weeks before.

After Mrs. Burns left the room Jean came boldly out from her hiding place and stood before the startled couple, who gazed at her in amazement. She looked at them insolently, a sneer on her full lips.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Burns," she interrupted sarcastically. The color slowly faded from his ruddy face. Was she going to expose that shameful page in his past history to this innocent child? Would she dare, could she be so reckless, so shameless? he asked himself fearfully.

"I thought ye had gone," he said, dangerously calm, stepping up to her.

"I could not go till I had delivered a message," she explained, dropping her eyes before the determined light in his.

"What is it?" he asked, puzzled by her tone and manner.

"It is of great importance and for your ears alone," she replied glibly. "I'm sure this lady—Miss Campbell, is it not?—will not mind leaving us for a moment," and she smiled amiably into Mary's innocent inquiring face.



He led Mary gently to the door. "It'll be only for a moment, Mary," he said quietly.

"I dinna' mind," she answered brightly. "'Tis near time for me to be going hame, ye ken," and with a smile she left them together.

"Noo, then, what is your message?" he said with calm abruptness, as the door closed.

"This!" and she threw back her head defiantly. "You must give up this Mary Campbell."

He looked at her in amazement. "What do ye mean?" he gasped, opening his eyes in bewilderment.

"I mean you must make me your wife." Her pale and agitated face made him wonder if she had gone quite daft. Before he could answer she continued stridently, "You must marry me now, before it is too late, too late to save my name from dishonor and disgrace. Now do you understand?"

A look of incredulous horror slowly blanched his face to ashy whiteness. Had he heard aright? Surely she was jesting; it could not be possible—and yet, why not? His haggard eyes searched her colorless face as though he would read her very soul. Calmly she bore the scrutiny and then, with a groan of anguish, he sank into a chair, weak and trembling. "I canna, I willna, believe," he muttered hoarsely. "It's a lie, it's a lie, Jean Armour!"

"It's the truth, I tell you," she cried passionately, wringing her hands. "What else think you would



force me, the rich Belle of Mauchline, to humble my pride and stoop to plead to a poverty-stricken farmer to wed me?" She laughed wildly.

"Can it be true, can it be true?" he whispered to himself dully. He felt dazed by the suddenness, the total unexpectedness, of the blow. He closed his eyes wearily. What was it she wanted him to do, he could not think. He sat dumbly waiting for her to speak again.

"You must write out an acknowledgment and sign your name to it," she continued, her voice low and insistent. "It is an irregular marriage I know, but it will save me from my father's wrath, when I can keep my plight from him no longer." He still remained silent, his face hidden in his hands. "Will you do this?" she demanded anxiously, "or," and her voice grew hard and threatening, "or shall I appeal to the Parish officers to help me save my good name from disgrace?" Quickly he raised his head. At his look of indignant scorn she winced and turned away, flushing angrily.

With a mirthless little laugh he retorted with bitter emphasis, "Your good name, indeed!"

She turned on him defiantly. "I was no worse than other girls," she flippantly retorted. "Only more unfortunate. Will you do what I ask? Quick, tell me, someone is coming!" She nervously caught his hand. He did not speak. His face grew haggard and old-looking as he stood motionless, forming



his resolution. It seemed to her an eternity before he answered her.

“So be it,” he answered hoarsely, drawing his hand away from hers and moving slowly to the door. “I’ll send ye the lines by the posty to-morrow.”

With a cry of delight she gratefully held out her hand to him. But he quietly opened the door, and, without a word or look at her, stood silently holding it back, his head bowed low on his bosom, his face cold and repellent. Slowly Jean walked past him out into the deepening twilight. She felt a dawning pity in her heart for the wretched lad. She could not quite forget those old, happy days, those stolen walks and trysts along the banks of the Ayr. No one could make love so ardently as he, she thought with a sigh. Of all her lovers he had been the favorite, he was so ingenuous, so trustful and confiding, and yet so reckless, so imprudent and weak. She knew well he had never really loved her, and the thought had made her strive all the harder to win him. He was flattered by her open preference for him, and soon became an easy victim, a slave, to her seductive charms and sophisticated fascinations, for he was only human. And now the heart of that little dairymaid would be broken. A quick pang of shame and regret stole over her, but she instantly stifled it. She must think of self first, she told herself uneasily. Anyway she only wanted the marriage lines in case people should point an accusing finger at her. Later—well,



the marriage could be annulled privately, and no one be the wiser, for marriages were easily annulled in Scotland. She walked briskly to where the coach was standing, for they were waiting for her, determined to cast all gloomy, depressing thoughts from her for the time at least.

Robert mechanically closed the door behind her and walked slowly to the dresser. Taking from it a bottle of ink and a quill, he carried them to the table, and placing them upon it, sank heavily in a chair. Long he sat there, pen in hand, the victim of the profoundest melancholy, the deepest despair. The thought that it was his own fault, his indifference to consequences, his recklessness, his weak, sinful folly, that had plunged himself and others into the awful abyss of grief and sorrow, was like the bitterness of death to him. As he sat there with drawn and haggard face, while bitter regret gnawed deeply at his conscience, the plaintive tones of Mary's voice came through the window, singing softly:

“Ye banks and braes of bonnie Doon,  
How can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?”

A groan of agony escaped the grief-stricken man at the sound of the voice, which was sweeter than all else in the world to him.

“Mary, my lost Highland Mary!” he cried aloud, “how can I give ye up forever?” and throwing him-



self across the table he wept bitter tears of anguish and remorse.

“How can ye chant, ye little birds,  
An’ I sae weary, fu’ o’ care?”

continued the sweet voice in mournful cadence. Softly the words floated to the ears of the sorrowing man, like the echo of his own harrowing thoughts.

As Mary reached the open window she paused and gazed into the room eagerly. As she sees her lover sitting there so silent and alone, her smile is very sweet and tender.

“Dear laddie; asleep,” she whispers softly. “He must be o’er tired after his hard day’s work. God bless my laddie,” and with a smile of ineffable sweetness, she wafted a kiss to the bowed head and quickly passed on, wending her lonely way back to Castle Montgomery, while the man sitting there in agonized silence, with clenched teeth and tense muscles, slowly raised his head to listen, in heart-broken silence, to her sweet voice floating back to him in silvery melody, as she took up the broken thread of her song:

“Thou’lt break my heart, thou warbling bird,  
That wantons thro’ the flow’ring thorn.  
Thou minds me o’ departed joys,  
Departed, never to return.”

The song died away in the distance.

“God pity her, God pity me,” he murmured brokenly.



## CHAPTER VIII

FROM the huge, low ceilinged kitchen of Castle Montgomery, which was ablaze with light, came the gladsome sound of mirth and revelry, for

“Some merry countre folks together did convene,  
To burn their nits and pou’ their stocks, and hold their hal-  
lowe’en,  
For blythe that night.”

For miles around the annual invitations had been sent broadcast, and to-night the capacious kitchen was taxed to its utmost. It was, however, a singularly good-natured, if over-hilarious, gathering that had assembled to do justice to old Bess’s cooking, and to test their fate through the medium of the many charms so well known to all the peasantry.

There was Poosie Nancy in her stiffly-starched frilled cap and her new kirtle, complacently nodding here and there to all of her acquaintances as they flocked about her. Poosie Nancy was a merry old soul. For years she had been the mistress of the Arms Inn, the public house on the high road, where Souter and Tam O’Shanter were wont to idle away their time and, incidentally, their “siller.” Standing on one foot behind her was Molly Dunn. Molly was consciously resplendent in a new plaid frock, made by her own unskilled hands, and while it was certainly



not a thing of beauty, it surely was a joy forever, to the lassies, who laughingly twitted her about her handiwork. But she heeded not their good-natured jibes. She was admiringly watching Daddy Auld, the little old minister, who sat in the midst of an admiring group of his parishioners at the other side of the room, who evidently stood in no awe of him, judging from the bursts of laughter which greeted his frequent attempts at jocularities.

“Where is Tam O’Shanter, Souter Johnny?” suddenly asked old Bess, who was proudly doing the honors as mistress of ceremonies. Souter was assiduously paying court to the comely Poosie Nancy in the opposite corner with an eye to future possibilities.

“He willna be here till late,” he replied impatiently, addressing the crowd. “I left him at the Arms Inn, an’ if he drinks much mair whisky, he will na’ be here at all, I’m thinkin’,” and he turned eagerly to his inamorata, who was fanning herself indifferently with a plantain leaf.

“He’ll fall into the Doon some night an’ be drowned, sure as fate,” said she, carelessly dismissing the subject.

“Take your partners for the reel!” shouted big Malcolm Macrae stentoriously, at this juncture. Old Donald tuned up his fiddle with gleeful alacrity.

Souter ceremoniously offered Poosie his arm, which she condescendingly accepted, and majesti-



cally they walked to the middle of the floor. With much laughing and joking and good-natured rivalry, they were all quickly paired off, and soon the rafters rang with the happy voices of the hilarious dancers as they merrily sang to the tune that blind Donald was scratching out on his old and faithful, though unmelodious, fiddle.

Mary had taken no part in the merrymaking, for she felt heavy and sad at heart. From her seat in the corner, where the light was the dimmest, she had watched the door with patient anxiety, hoping against hope that Robert would come, but she had waited in vain, and now the evening was nearly spent and soon they would be going home, happy and tired after their sport and entertainment, while she would steal away to her quarters over the kitchen and cry herself to sleep, as she had done for many nights past. Souter Johnny, who was in his element and the merriest of them all, had tried vainly to induce her to join the revelers in their sport, and many an honest laddie had sought her hand in the dance, only to be shyly refused. So gradually she was left in peace, and soon forgotten amid the excitement of their diversions. They had tried some of the famous charms, which decided the destinies of many of the lads and lassies that night, and now old Bess brought forth her long-hoarded bag of nuts, which she divided among them. Amid shouts of mirth and laughter, they proceeded to test the most famous of all the charms. As they rushed pellmell to the fireplace



and laid each particular nut in the fire, for which they had named the lad or lassie of their choice, and stood there eagerly watching, open-mouthed, to see how they would burn, Mary, with a quickly beating heart, stole unperceived close to the front row of watchers, and with a little prayer, quietly threw her pair into the fire. For a moment they burned slowly side by side, then with a hop and a jump they popped madly about, and finally at opposite sides of the fireplace they glowed redly for a time, then expired altogether. With a little, suppressed sob, unheeded in the general excitement, she hurried back to her seat, pale and trembling. It was as she had feared: the course of their love was never again to run smoothly, the charm had spoken. It had never been known to predict wrongly. Why had she sought to find out her fate? she asked herself pathetically. Unheeding the merry songs and dances going on around her, of which they never seemed to weary, and the unco tales and funny jokes, she sat there thinking her sweet, sad thoughts, and patiently waiting till they should depart for their homes, that she might seek the quiet of her bed, where her aching heart might find relief in the tears which now-a-days were so hard to control. Suddenly the laughter subsided, and Mary with a start raised her head to see all eyes turned on her.

“Mary, come here, lass,” called Souter Johnny, who was fanning himself vigorously.

“It’s your turn noo, Mary,” they cried boister-



ously. "So gie us a dance or a song," and they all pressed around her with good-natured suggestions.

Old Bess took the shrinking girl by the hand, and leading her forward, with a deep courtesy announced, "Hieland Mary will favor us wi' a song," then she left Mary standing in the center of the room suffering agonies of dread as she raised her frightened eyes to the group of laughing, good-natured, gaping faces about her.

"I canna' sing, I canna' sing, Souter," she faltered, turning to him beseechingly.

"Yes, ye can, dearie, just a—a verse, there's a girlie," he answered encouragingly. "Come and stand beside me, if that's any inspiration to ye," he added, smiling good-humoredly.

She ran to his side, and clutching him by the arm, tried to muster up her courage, for the good-natured audience were clamorously demanding a song. With a frightened little gasp she began to sing the first thing that came to her mind. "Oh, where, and oh, where is my Highland laddie gone?" she faltered out. A little titter passed through the crowd, for they knew that "Rab Burns was nae longer sweet on Mary Campbell," as they told each other in loud whispers. At the cruel sound Mary, whose lips had trembled ominously as she thought of her recreant lover, with an indignant look at the thoughtless ones, burst into a flood of tears. Quickly Souter led her



sobbing to a seat, while the others anxiously crowded round, conscience-stricken at their thoughtless levity.

"What's happent? what's happent? Has she fainted?" they asked in helpless confusion, gazing from one to the other.

"She's only a wee bittie tired," answered old Souter, tenderly smoothing the hair of the sorrowing lass. "Let her alone an' she'll be all right. Donald," he called, "start your fiddle; we're gang to hae anither dance."

The blind old patriarch smiled serenely, and raising his fiddle to his chin began to play, and soon the mirth and fun grew fast and furious as the dancers reeled and set, and crosst and cleekit.

While old Donald was playing, and the dance was well started, Souter quietly led Mary out in the open air, and sitting down on the doorstep, he drew her gently beside him. "Noo, Mary, what is the matter?" he inquired kindly. "Winna ye tell old Souter Johnny your trouble?"

"Ye ken why I am unhappy, Souter Johnny," answered Mary apathetically. He sighed and remained silent.

"Have ye an' Robert quarreled?" he asked presently.

"No," she answered sadly.

"Weel, come tell old Souter; it may ease your mind, lassie," and he drew her plaid about her shoulders, for the night air was keen.



“Well, ye ken, Souter,” she faltered, a pitiful little break in her voice, “Robbie an’ I were to be married after the plantin’ was o’er, and ’tis noo harvest time, but ne’er a word has he spoke of our marriage since that day. He is so changed, Souter, I—I canna understand him at all,” and she leaned wearily against his shoulder like a tired child.

“That Armour lass is at the bottom of it all, I ken,” thought Souter angrily, drawing her close to him.

“Perhaps,” continued Mary sadly, “perhaps he has grown tired of his Highland Mary.” She plucked idly at the fringe of her plaid, a look of resignation on her sweet face.

“Tired o’ ye?” repeated Souter incredulously. “A man would be a most fearful fool to gie up such a bonnie, sweet lassie as ye are. Noo, if I were only younger, Robbie Burns wouldna hae things all his own way, I tell ye,” and he nodded his head vigorously.

“I ken he has some trouble,” said Mary, not heeding his jocular efforts to cheer her, “that makes him so unhappy like; if he would only let me share that trouble wi’ him, whate’er it is, how gladly I would do it.”

Souter rubbed his bearded chin reflectively.

“Weel, Mary, ye ken Robert’s a genius,” he answered soberly. “An’ ye can ne’er tell how a genius is gang to act, therefore ye must ne’er be



surprised, Mary, at whate'er he does, for genius is but anither name for eccentricity an'—an' perverse-ness," and he sighed deeply, his kind old face wrinkled with perplexity.

"I feel, Souter," she continued, pathetically calm, "that I am slowly, but surely, drifting out o' his life forever." She gazed suddenly into the face bending over her solicitously.

"Dinna ye know the cause, Souter?" she asked beseechingly.

He brushed his hand across his eyes and slowly shook his head. She sighed patiently and turned away her head and gazed listlessly into space. For a few moments there was deep silence, broken only by the bursts of laughter which came to them at intervals from within.

"Lassie, listen to me," finally said the old man, his voice cheery and hopeful once more. "Ye mustna be so down-hearted; there is a cause for everything in this world, an' I ken Robert loves ye wi' all his heart, just the same as ever. Why, ye can see the glimmer o' love in his e'e whene'er he looks at ye." He smiled approvingly as Mary's face brightened, then continued decidedly, "Robert is well-nigh daft that he hasna heard frae Lord Glencairn all this time; that is why he is sae worrid an' nervous, sae moody an' neglectful; noo cheer thee, lassie, it'll all come right in time," and he patted her shoulder lovingly.



“Oh, I feel sae much better, Souter,” she murmured, pressing his hand gratefully. “An’ noo I’ll na borrow trouble any mair, thinkin’ Robert doesna’ love me.” She smiled happily and jumped lightly to her feet.

“Whist, Mary, why dinna ye make sure o’ that?” whispered Souter, looking around him mysteriously. She looked at him wonderingly. “’Tis Hallowe’en, ye ken, an’ a’ the witches an’ fairies are about this night an’ will grant any wish made. Try a charm, lassie.”

“I did try one,” replied Mary with a sigh. “I burned the nuts, but it didna’ come out right; that’s what made me sad.”

“Ah, weel, try anither; go pull a stock.”

“Oh, nay, I’m afraid to go out in the field at night,” she replied timidly, drawing back. “But I’ll go if ye’ll come wi’ me.” She held out her hand to him.

“Nay, thank ye, Mary,” he said grimly. “I dinna’ care to see the face o’ my future wife just yet; I fear I couldna’ stand the shock.”

“Well, I darena’ go alone,” answered Mary decidedly, her hand on the latch. “Think of anither charm, one I can do indoors.”

“An’ do ye think the fairies will come around where ’tis light?” he cried in amazement. “Och, no, ye must go to the darkest place ye can find.”



His little round eyes gazed into hers with solemn earnestness.

Mary shivered with apprehension and peered into the darkness. "Oh, Souter, think o' the witches," she said nervously.

"They willna' hurt ye," he answered a little impatiently. "Ye maun sow a handful of hempseed an' harrow it o'er wi' anything ye can draw after ye, an' repeat o'er and o'er," assuming a guttural monotone:

"Hempseed, I sow thee; hempseed, I sow thee,  
And him that is to be my true love,  
Come after me and draw thee."

"And will I see him then?" whispered Mary eagerly, drawing near to him.

"Aye," returned Souter hoarsely. "Look over your left shoulder an' ye'll see your future husband pullin' hemp. Noo, off wi' ye; ye'll find some seed in the barn." Mary tried to summon up her courage, for she was highly superstitious, like all the peasantry, and was anxious to test the potency of the charm, and finally succeeded in taking a few faltering footsteps in the direction of the barn, when suddenly the door behind them opened, and Molly Dunn appeared in the doorway. She held in one hand a lighted candle, while in the other she carried a broken piece of looking-glass, into which she



was gazing intently, her eyes fixed and staring. Behind her, crowding through the doorway, followed the now noiseless revelers, who were stifling their laughter to breathlessly watch the outcome of the well-known charm, whose power Molly had decided to put to a test, though believing staunchly in its potency. Molly majestically walked down the steps and across to the well, where, depositing her mirror on the curbing, she took from the pocket of her skirt a round, red apple, from which she bit a goodly piece and began vigorously to chew upon it, the while holding her candle above her head and anxiously watching her reflection in the mirror.

“Molly’s eatin’ the apple at the glass,” chuckled Souter to Mary softly. “She’s lookin’ for the face o’ her future husband. Let’s hae some fun wi’ her.” He motioned to them all to keep silent, and stealing softly over to the unconscious Molly, intoned in a deep sepulchral voice, “Molly Dunn, if ye would see your future husband, dinna’ ye dare turn your head this way.”

Molly gave a shriek of terror, thereby choking herself with the piece of apple she was industriously eating, and falling on her knees, her teeth chattering in fear, she cried frantically, “The witches! the witches!”

“Nay, I’m the Deil himsel’,” answered Souter in awe-inspiring accents. Molly groaned aloud, in mortal terror, not daring to turn around. “An’ I’ve



come for ye, Molly Dunn," slowly continued her tormentor.

"Nay, nay!" cried Molly, her eyes staring wildly in front of her. "I want naught to do wi' ye; gang awa', gang awa'!" and she wildly waved her hands behind her.

"Not till ye've seen the face o' the man ye'll wed," replied the voice. "Beauteous fairy of Hallowe'en, come forth," he commanded majestically, beckoning to Mary to come nearer. She did so. "Speak, kind fairy." He whispered to her what to say to the awestruck Molly.

Thus admonished, Mary, who was once more her old light-hearted winsome self, raised her sweet voice and spoke in a high falsetto, "Gaze in the looking-glass, Molly Dunn; eat o' the apple, think o' the one ye desire to see, an' his face will appear beside yours."

"Behold, I pass the magic wand o'er your head, ye faithless woman," added Souter threateningly.

Hurriedly Molly complied with the injunctions, and patiently she knelt there, apple in hand, the candle light glaring full on her eager, ugly face, and the wisp of faded hair tied tightly on top of her head, which was waving wildly about, while she waited for the face to appear beside her own reflection in the glass.

"Do ye see him yet?" asked Mary eagerly, forgetting her rôle of "The Fairy of Hallowe'en,"



and speaking in her natural tone, while the group at the doorway drew closer to the kneeling woman in their excited curiosity.

"Nay, not yet," replied Molly in an awestruck whisper.

"Hold the candle higher," admonished Souter, "an' eat quicker." Molly did so. "Noo do you see your handsome lover?" He crept up slyly behind Molly, and bending over her shoulder, peered into the glass, where he beheld the shadowy reflection of his own face looming up beside that of the wondering Molly. With a gasp of pleasure not unmixed with fear, she dropped the glass, and turning quickly grabbed the surprised Souter and held him close. As she raised her candle to see whom the fairies had sent to her, she recognized her tormentor, and with a shriek of rage, she clouted the laughing Souter over the head with her candlestick, amid peals of laughter from the delighted spectators, until he called for mercy.

"Dinna I suit ye, Molly?" he asked in an injured tone, nursing his sorely punished head.

"Ye skelpie limmer's face, ye, how dare ye try sich sportin' wi' me?" she cried angrily.

"The glass canna' lie," called out old Bess with a shake of her frilled cap.

"An' ye seen Souter's face there, Molly," laughed Poosie Nancy loudly. "There's no gainsaying that."



"I want a braw mon, a handsome mon," whimpered Molly. "Ye're no a mon at all, ye wee skelpie limmer." The burst of laughter which greeted this sally was very disconcerting to Souter, whose height, five feet two inches, was distinctly a sore subject.

"Try anither charm, Molly," said Mary, feeling sorry for the poor innocent.

"Aye, I will," replied Molly eagerly, drying her tears with the back of her hand.

"Then come alang," said Souter, ready to make amends. "Come an' pull a stock. Gie me your hand." She did so eagerly. "Noo shut your eyes tight; that's it; come along noo." But Molly braced herself and refused to move.

"I'm afeered o' the dark an' the witches," she faltered, her teeth chattering, her eyes so tightly closed that her face was drawn into a mass of deep wrinkles.

They all crowded round the couple with words of praise and encouragement, and presently Molly was persuaded to take a step forward and then another, and finally the two moved slowly away and were swallowed up in the darkness.

Meanwhile the rest of the revelers, after a whispered consultation, hurried to the outhouse, amid smothered shrieks of laughter.

Molly and Souter walked slowly and timidly toward the field of corn, which looked unreal and shadowy in the pale moonlight. Molly's few remaining teeth were now chattering so loudly that Souter be-



gan to grow nervous. He jerked her arm impatiently.

"Be a mon, Molly," he hoarsely whispered, his voice a little shaky.

"I'm afeered to," she answered, opening her eyes and looking fearfully around. They took a few more stumbling step, then stopped.

"Och, get off my foot, ye towsie tyke!" cried Souter. Molly hastily removed the offending member and on they went again. Suddenly they stopped, rooted to the spot in terror. A low, blood-curdling moan had rent the stillness. Again it came, chilling the very blood in their veins by its awful weirdness.

"The witches! the witches!" gasped Molly in abject fear.

Turning, they beheld a sight that caused their hair to stand on end, "the marrow to congeal in their bones," as Souter afterward explained the sensation which came over him. Coming toward them was a score or more of hideous apparitions with fire blazing from their eyes and their horribly grinning mouths, and groaning and moaning like lost souls. With a mortal cry of terror, the frightened couple sped on wings of fear back to the friendly light of the kitchen, the ghostly figures darting after them with diabolical bursts of laughter. As they slammed the door of the house behind them their pursuers stopped and quickly blew out their Jack-o'-Lanterns and then threw them to one side.



"I didna ken mortal mon could e'er run so fast," snickered Poosie Nancy to the others as they noiselessly entered the kitchen in time to hear the wonderful tale of Souter's hairbreadth escape from the witches.

Another hour of mirth and jollity, of dance and song soon sped around. Souter and Molly were still the center of an admiring group, for they had seen the witches with their own eyes, and that distinction was theirs alone that night. Suddenly the old clock struck twelve, then began a merry scrambling for bonnets and plaids. Having donned them, they noisily crowded around their hostesses, who were lined up against the wall, waiting ceremoniously to be thanked for their hospitality and to bid their parting guests godspeed. As the darts of homely wit and repartee flew back and forth among them, causing the lads to burst into uproarious laughter or to grin in awkward bashfulness, and the lassies to turn their heads away blushing or to toss their curls coquettishly, the door burst in suddenly, and Tam O'Shanter staggered to the center of the floor, pale, wild-eyed, and disheveled.

"Tam O'Shanter!" they cried, gazing at him in startled amazement. Souter quickly reached his old cronie's side.

"What's the matter, mon? hae ye seen a ghost?" he asked concernedly.

"Aye, worse than that, much worse," hoarsely



replied Tam, wiping the sweat from off his forehead with a trembling hand.

“What’s happened?” cried old Bess fearfully.

“Calm yoursel’ an’ tell us, Tam,” said Souter soothingly. They brought him a chair, for he trembled like an aspen leaf. Throwing himself into it, he gazed about him fearfully, the while struggling to regain his breath.

“Well, ’tis this way, Souter,” he began presently in a husky whisper. “I left the Arms Inn about an hour ago or thereabouts an’ started for hame, for ’tis a long ride to Carrick, ye ken, an’ a most uncanny ride e’en in the daylight.”

“That’s true,” affirmed Poosie Nancy with a nod of conviction to the others.

“Weel,” continued Tam impressively, “a few miles beyond the Maypole road ye have to pass a dark, uncanny spot, the cairn where the hunters found the murdered bairn. Ye ken the spot, Souter?” turning to him for confirmation.

Souter nodded his head quickly. “Aye, Tam, I ken it weel, for ’twas near there old Mingo’s mother hanged hersel’.” Old Bess looked over her shoulder nervously.

“Aye,” eagerly assented Tam, then he continued, “Weel, a weird sight awaited me there; my blood runs cold noo. Suddenly I heard a sound o’ music and revelry, and Maggie stopped still, frightened stiff. I looked up, and glimmering thro’ the trees



was auld Kirk Alloway all a blaze o' light." He paused to note the effect of his astounding statement.

They looked at each other disbelievingly. Some turned angrily away, muttering to themselves. Was old Tam making sport of them?

"Go alang, mon," cried Poosie Nancy with an incredulous sniff of her pug nose. "'Tis naught but an old tumbled down ruin."

"I'm telling ye gospel truth," replied Tam earnestly. They crowded around again, ready to be convinced, though still eying him distrustfully.

"Well, I was nae afraid," continued Tam bashfully, "for I was inspired by bold John Barleycorn, so I rode Maggie close to the wall an' there thro' the openin', I saw inside, and wow! I saw an unco sight!" Tam was becoming warmed up with his recital. The eager, excited faces crowding around him had restored his courage and flattered his vanity. He paused impressively, his eyes fixed and staring, gazing straight past the faces of his listeners as though he saw the unco sight again. He noted with pleasure the frightened glances they gave over their shoulders. Then he proceeded slowly in a sibilant whisper, "There were warlocks and witches dancin' hornpipes and jigs around the Kirk, dressed only in their sarks. There were open coffins standin' around like clothespresses, an' in each coffin stood a corpse holdin' in its cauld hand a burnin' light. An' by that light I saw two span-lang wee unchristened



bairns, white and cold upon the holy table." Tam wiped the sweat off his brow and moistened his dry lips; then he proceeded with his harrowing tale. "Beside the bairns lay a bloody knife wi' gray hairs still sticking to the heft an'——"

But with a shudder of fear, their faces blanched and drawn, they exclaimed in doubting horror, "Nay!" "Stop!" "Out on ye, mon!" "It's nae true!" etc. Tam was not to be cut off in the midst of his tale so unceremoniously.

He rose excitedly from his seat and continued rapidly. "The dancers were twisting and turning like snakes, and there in a winnock-bunker sat Auld Nick himsel', in the shape of a beast, playing the pipes. Och, friends, it was an inspirin' sight, and in my excitement I yelled out——"

"What?" cried the lads in unison.

"'Well done, Cutty Sark!'" shouted Tam, proudly, well pleased at his own temerity.

They boisterously applauded him for his courage, but the lassies still clung to each other nervously.

"Then what happened, Tam?" asked Souter quizzingly. He could not quite bring himself to believe Tam's improbable tale, he knew the old sinner so well.

"Weel, the lights went out in an instant," continued Tam dramatically. "I had no sooner turned Maggie's head than out poured those unco witches like bees buzzin' in anger. I didna' stop to meet



them, for Maggie, knowing her danger, bounded off like a terrified deer and plunged off desperately through the trees toward the brig with all these witches followin' wi' eldritch screeches, close to her heels till I could feel their breath on my clammy neck. Oh, what an awful moment for me! but I knew if I could but reach the keystone of the auld brig I would be safe, for witches darena cross a running stream, ye ken. Mag did her speedy utmost, but old Nannie pursued close behind and flew at me with tooth and nail, but she didna' know my Maggie's mettle," Tam laughed gleefully, "for with one grand leap she reached the brig and saved her master's life, just as that Carline Nannie caught her by the rump, an' my poor Maggie left behind her old gray tail."

As he finished his recital he gazed around him triumphantly. There was an audible sigh of relief from all.

"That's a burning shame," said old Bess sympathetically, alluding to the loss of Maggie's tail.

"What a wonderful experience ye had, Tam," cried Poosie Nancy admiringly. They all congratulated him on his narrow escape and pressed food and drink on him, showered him with words of praise, and in short made him out a daring hero, much to Souther's disgust. He sat apart from the rest in dignified silence, his heart wounded and sore, for was not his late ghostly exploit completely ignored and forgot-



ten? "Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi," he might have said to himself.

"Listen," cried Tam, jumping to his feet, his face tense with eagerness. Faintly the patter, patter of a horse's hoofs was heard drawing nearer and nearer.

"'Tis only someone comin' alang the highway," said Souter carelessly.

"'Tis my Maggie," cried Tam almost tearfully. "She's comin' back for her master," and with a bound he reached the open doorway. A few steps took him to the stone wall along the other side of which ran the King's Highway. "She's comin', she's comin', my faithful Maggie is comin'," he cried joyfully.

"She must be an unco sight wi'out a tail, 'Tam," sneered Souter. A roar of laughter greeted this sarcastic retort.

"Dinna' ye dare laugh," cried Tam, turning on them furiously. The hoofbeats stopped suddenly. In the misty moonlight they caught a glimpse of a huge white creature, looking very spectral and ghost-like, impatiently tossing its head from side to side as if in search of something or someone. With a glad cry Tam vaulted the fence, old as he was, and dashed down the road, calling lovingly, "I'm comin', Maggie, I'm comin' to ye." A whinny of delight, a snort of pleasure, greeted him as he reached his old mare's side. Then like a phantom, the old



gray mare and her rider sped swiftly past them on into the night and away toward Carrick.

Silently they watched them, while the hoofbeats grew fainter and fainter and then were lost to sound. Such was Tam O'Shanter's tale, the fame of which soon spread throughout all Ayrshire.



## CHAPTER IX

IN a sequestered spot beside the brook which runs through the lower end of the big field at Mossziel farm, Robert sat dreamily watching the shallow brook at his feet slowly trickle along over the stones. He had left the field, his heart filled with anger against his brother, who had been reproving him for his thoughtlessness, his absent-mindedness; but gradually his temper had melted, and removing his bonnet from his fevered brow, he had given himself up to his reveries. A little later Gilbert found him there, his loose unbleached linen shirt open at the neck, eagerly writing on a scrap of paper he held in his hand.

The last few weeks Gilbert had thrown off his cloak of habitual reserve, and had treated his brother with less harshness, less severity. He had watched the slowly drifting apart of the lovers with wonder and delight. Could it be that they were tiring of each other? he asked himself over and over again. If that were so then perhaps some day—but he would not permit himself to think of the future. He would be happy in the present. For he was comparatively happy now, happier than he had ever expected to be. Since Robert's avoidance of her, Mary had again



turned to him for sympathy, and once more they were on their old friendly footing. True she was a sad, despondent companion, but he was blissfully happy just to walk beside her from kirk, to listen to the sound of her sweet voice, even though his brother was the only topic of conversation, to feel the touch of her little hand as he helped her over the stile. He thought of all this now as he regarded his brother in thoughtful silence. Presently he called his name. Receiving no answer, he strode through the overhanging willows and touched him quietly on the shoulder.

With a start Robert looked up into his brother's face, then he turned slowly away. "What is wrong noo, Gilbert?" he asked bitterly. "It seems I will be doing nothing right o' late."

"Nothin' is wrong, lad," replied Gilbert, his face reddening. "I—I only came to tell ye I am sorry I spoke sae harshly to ye just noo."

"Say no more, brother," replied Robert quickly, rising with outstretched hand, his face bright and smiling. So ready was he to forgive any unkindness when his pardon was sought. "'Tis all forgot. I ken I do try your patience sore wi' my forgetfulness and carelessness, but I couldna' help it. The voice of the Goddess Muse, whom I adore, suddenly whispered in my ear and I forgot my work, my surroundings, and stood enraptured, entranced behind my patient steed, catchin' the thoughts and fancies that were tumblin', burstin' from my brain, eager to be let



loose, and this is the fruit o' my inspiration almost perfected." He handed his brother the paper on which he had been writing.

"Is it a song of harvesting?" asked Gilbert sarcastically without glancing at it.

"Nay," replied Robert softly. "'Tis called the 'Cotter's Saturday Night,' an' ye will recognize, no doubt, the character and the theme, for 'tis partly of our own and of our father's life I have written. 'Tis my best work, Gilbert, I ken truly." He eagerly watched his brother's face as he slowly read the verses through.

"May the light of success shine on it," he said kindly, when he had finished. "But it seems o'er doubtful noo that the world will e'er see this, or any of your verses, for not a word hae ye heard from Edinburgh since ye sent Sir William Creech your collection of poems."

Robert raised his head and regarded his brother in despairing hopelessness. "I ken it weel, brother," he replied. "And my heart grows sick and weary, waitin', waitin', for tidings, be they good or bad. Two lang months have passed since I sent him my collection, an' still not a word, not a sign. Nae doubt they were thrown in a corner, overlooked an' neglected." For a moment he stood there gazing across the fields, his vision blurred by the tears of disappointment which filled his eyes. "Oh, why did Lord Glencairn raise my hopes so high?" he cried passion-



ately, "only to have them dashed to the ground again." Gilbert remained silent, his eyes cast down. The sight of his brother's misery touched him keenly. But there was nothing he could say. "I believed him and trusted to his honor, his promise," continued Robert dejectedly, "an' for what?" He put on his bonnet and clasping his hands behind him in his characteristic attitude, slowly walked toward the cottage, a prey to his gloomy thoughts.

"Be patient, Rob, yet a while," said Gilbert encouragingly, as he walked along beside him. "Who kens what the morrow will bring forth?"

"The morrow?" repeated Robert grimly. "Me-thinks I'll ne'er know peace an' tranquillity again on this earth."

They strode on in silence. As they neared the cottage Gilbert laid his hand on his brother's shoulder, bringing him to a standstill. "Robert," he said quietly and firmly, "I want to speak to ye about Mary."

Robert turned his head away abruptly. "What of her?" he asked in a low voice.

"What are your intentions toward her?" demanded Gilbert earnestly. "Do ye intend to marry her, or are ye but triflin' idly wi' her affections?"

Robert turned on him quickly. "Triflin'?" he repeated indignantly. "Nay, Gilbert, ye wrong me deeply."

"Forgive me, but ye ken Mary is not like other



lassies to think lightly o’,” said Gilbert, his eye searching his brother’s face keenly.

“Heaven forbid,” ejaculated Robert in a low, tense voice.

“I canna’ understand your conduct o’ late,” continued Gilbert earnestly. “I fear your stay in Mauchline is responsible for the great change in ye, for ye are not the same lad ye were when ye left hame. I fear ye have sadly departed from those strict rules of virtue and moderation ye were taught by your parents, Robert.”

“What mean ye, Gilbert?” inquired Robert, startled.

“Ah, Rob,” responded Gilbert, shaking his head sadly, “I ken mair than ye think; reports travel e’en in the country.”

The thought that his wild escapades were known to his narrow-minded though upright brother, and perhaps to others, filled Robert with sudden shame. “Weel, Gilbert,” he replied, trying to speak lightly, “Ye ken that I have been fallin’ in love and out again wi’ a’ the lassies ever since I was fifteen, but nae thought of evil ever entered my mind, ye ken that weel.”

“Aye, I ken that,” answered Gilbert quickly, “until ye went to Mauchline. And noo ye have come back a changed lad, your vows to Mary forgotten. If I thought ye would try to wrong her——” he stopped abruptly, for Robert had faced



him, white and trembling, his eyes flashing indignantly.

“Stop, Gilbert!” he commanded, intensely calm. “Mary Campbell’s purity is as sacred to me as an angel’s in heaven. I would sooner cut my tongue out by the roots than to willingly say aught to cause her a moment’s misery or sorrow. Ye cruelly misjudge me, Gilbert.” He turned away, feeling hurt and angry that he should be so misunderstood by his brother, and yet was he misjudging him, was he not indeed causing her much sorrow? he asked himself bitterly.

Soon the whole guilty truth must be disclosed, his faithlessness, his unworthiness. If she suffered now, what would be her misery when she learned that an insurmountable barrier had arisen between them, cruelly separating them forever. The thought filled him with unspeakable anguish.

“Forgive me, Rob, for my hasty words,” said Gilbert remorsefully. “But ye ken Mary is very dear to—to us all; that is why I spoke so plainly.”

At that moment the door of the cottage opened and the object of their discussion stepped into view. The poor little moth could not help fluttering around the candle, and so she was to be found at Mossgiel whenever her duties would permit her to steal away.

“Oh, here ye are, lads,” she called out to them, her face brightening. “Will ye be comin’ in to tea noo?” They did not answer. “My, what long



faces ye both have," she continued, smiling. "This isn't the Sabbath Day, so there's no need of such sorrowful faces."

"I didna' ken ye were here," answered Gilbert, going toward her.

Robert sat down by the well, the look of pain on his melancholy face deepening as he listened to her gentle voice. He closed his eyes wearily and leaned back against the curbing, the paper held loosely in his hand. It was so hard to realize that never again would he press that form to his aching heart, that he must renounce her utterly. Oh, if he could only die now, how much better it would be for them all, he weakly told himself.

"I'm going to stay here to tea wi' ye this night," said Mary wistfully. Why didn't Robert speak to her just one word of greeting? she thought sadly. "Your mother bade me tell ye supper is waiting whenever ye are ready." She took a few halting steps toward the well. "Are ye comin' in, Robert?" she inquired timidly.

"In a wee," he answered quietly, without looking at her. "After I have finished my poem." Mary turned back, crushed to the heart by his apparent coldness.

"Weel, lads," cried Mrs. Burns brightly, stepping out on the low, broad stoop followed by Souter, who held a cup of steaming tea in one hand and some oat-cakes in the other, on which he nibbled with evident



relish. "I heard your voices and couldna' stay within," and she beamed on them lovingly.

"Ye're at it again, I see, Robert," observed Souther tactlessly. Robert flushed angrily. He was easily irritated in his present state of mind. "Ye'll write yoursel' into the grave, mon; ye're not lookin' very peart the noo."

Mrs. Burns regarded her eldest son with anxious eyes. "Aye, I fear, laddie, ye are too intent on your rhymin'," she said solicitously. His abstracted moods, his melancholy moroseness had filled her loving heart with gloomy forebodings. "Sae much livin' in the clouds, my son, is unhealthful, an' does but make ye moody an' uncertain in temper. Is it worth while to wreck body, mind an' soul to gain a little fame an' fortune, which, alas, seem so very far off?" she asked, putting her hand lovingly on his bowed head.

"Ye dinna' understand, mither," he replied sadly. "I love to write. 'Tis my very life; thought flows unbidden from my brain." He rose to his feet and pointing to the stream, which could be faintly seen at the foot of the hill, continued with mournful finality, "Why, mother, I might as well try to stop the waters of yonder rushin' brook as to attempt to smother the poetic fancies that cry for utterance. Nay, 'tis too late noo to dissuade me from my purpose," and he turned and watched the setting sun slowly sink behind the distant hills in a flood of golden splendor.



Souter noticed with uneasiness the gloom which had settled upon them all as the result of his careless words. Why was he such a thoughtless fool? Ah, well, he would make them forget their troubles.

"Och, Mistress Burns," he cried, smacking his lips with apparent relish, "'tis a mighty fine cup of tea, a perfectly grand cup. It fair cheers the heart of mon," and he drained it to the bottom.

"An' where do ye think the oatcakes were made, Souter?" asked Mary brightly.

"Weel, I'm no' a good hand at guessin'," he answered, thoughtfully scratching his head; "but by their taste an' sweetness, I should say that Mistress Burns made them hersel'."

The good dame regarded him witheringly. "I didna' ken that oatcakes were sweet, Souter," she retorted.

Mary laughed softly at his discomfiture. "Weel, they come frae my sister in Applecross."

"Applecross!" he repeated, his face lighting up with pleasure. "Noo I mind they did have the Highland flavor, for true."

"Aye, an' ye finished the last one for that reason, no doubt," replied Mrs. Burns wrathfully. "Ye're a pig, mon. Come awa', lads, your supper will be gettin' cold," and she led the way inside, followed meekly by Souter. Gilbert waited for Mary to enter, but she stood wistfully gazing at Robert.



With a sigh he left them together, and Robert entered the cottage.

Mary slowly approached Robert as he stood looking across to the distant hills, and patiently waited for him to speak to her, but he stood there in tense silence, not daring to trust himself to even look at the pure flower-like face held up to his so pleadingly.

"Robbie," she said timidly after a pause, which seemed interminable to them both, "willna' ye let the sunlight enter your heart an' be your old bonnie sel' once mair? It will make us all sae happy." She put her hand on his arm lovingly. "Why are ye sae changed, laddie? Dinna' ye want me to love ye any mair?"

At the gentle touch of her fingers an uncontrollable wave of passionate love and longing came over him, sweeping away all resolutions resistlessly. "Oh, my Mary, my Mary," he cried hoarsely. "I do want your love, I do want it noo an' forever," and he clasped her lovingly to his aching heart. Blissfully she lay in his strong arms while he showered her flushed and happy face with the hungry, fervent, loving kisses which he had denied himself so long, and murmured little caressing words of endearment which filled her soul with rapture and happiness. "How I love ye, Mary," he breathed in her ear again and again as he held her close.



“An’ how happy ye make me once mair, laddie,” she answered, nestling against him lovingly.

“An’ how happy we will——,” he began, then stopped pale and trembling, for grim recollection had suddenly loomed up before him with all its train of bitter, ugly facts; and conscience began to drum insistently into his dulled ear. “Tell her the truth now, the whole truth,” it said. But the voice of the tempter whispered persuasively, saying, “Why tell her now? wait, let her be happy while she may, put it off as long as possible.”

“What is it, Robbie?” cried Mary fearfully. “Tell me what is troublin’ ye; dinna’ be afraid.” His bowed head bent lower and lower.

“Oh, Mary, I’m sae unworthy, sae unworthy of all your pure thoughts, your tender love,” he faltered despairingly, resolved to tell her all. “Ye dinna’ ken all my weakness, my deception, and into what depths of sin I have fallen.” She sought to interrupt him, but he continued rapidly, his voice harsh with the nervous tension, his face pallid from the stress of his emotions. “I have a confession to make ye——”

“Nay, nay, laddie,” cried Mary, putting her hand over his trembling lips. “Dinna’ tell me anything. I want nae confession from ye, except that o’ your love,” and she smoothed his cheek tenderly. “Ye ken that is music to my ears at all times, but if ye are deceivin’ me, if ye have na always been true to me, an’ your vows, why, laddie, keep the knowl-



edge to yourself'. I am content noo, and ye ken happiness is such a fleetin' thing that I mean to cling to it as long as I can." She took his hands in both her own and held them close to her heart. "Ye ken, Robbie, ill news travels apace and 'twill reach my ears soon enough," she continued with a mournful little quaver in her voice. "But no matter what comes, what ye may do, my love for ye will overlook it all; I will see only your virtues, my love, not your vices."

Robert bowed his head in heart-broken silence. Grief, shame, and remorse like tongues of fiery flames were scorching and burning into his very soul. Quietly they sat there engrossed in their thoughts, till the voice of Mrs. Burns calling to them from the cottage to come to supper roused them from their lethargy.

"We're comin' right awa'," answered Mary brightly. "Come, laddie, we mustna' keep the folks watin'."

She took his listless hand and drew him gently to the door and into the cottage.

Silently they took their places at the table, around which the others were already seated.

"By the way," said old blind Donald, the fiddler, who had dropped in on his way to Mauchline for a bite and a cup, "Poosie Nancy told me to tell ye, Mistress Burns, that she wa drop in to see ye this night."



"We'll be glad to see her," replied Mrs. Burns hospitably.

"And Daddy Auld says he'll be along, too," continued Donald, grinning broadly. "That is, if he isn't too busy convertin' souls."

"Convertin' souls," sneered Souter incredulously.

"Aye, ye should see the Jolly Beggars he was haranguin'. They were jumpin', an' rantin', an' singin' like daft Methodists."

"The auld hypocrites!" cried Mrs. Burns, buttering a scone which she placed in the old man's tremulous hand. "They didn't go to the manse for conversion; 'tis a square meal they are after. They ken the kind old heart o' Daddy Auld."

Souter leaned back in his chair and smiled reminiscently. "That reminds me o' a guid story," he began, chuckling.

"Never mind that story noo," remonstrated Mrs. Burns, who was in constant dread of Souter's risqué stories. "That'll keep."

"I never *can* tell that damn story," ejaculated Souter wrathfully.



## CHAPTER X

THEY had finished their meager supper, and now sat comfortably around the fire, Mrs. Burns and Mary busy with their knitting, the men contentedly smoking, while old Donald discordantly tuned up his fiddle.

“Noo, Donald,” said Souter briskly, “play us something lively.”

“Aye, I’ll play ye the Highland Fling, Souter Johnny, an’ ye can dance. Come alang noo,” and he started to play vigorously, keeping time with his foot.

“Aye, get out on the floor, Souter,” said Gilbert, pulling him out of his chair.

“Nay, nay, lad,” expostulated Souter fretfully, “I be too old to fling the toe noo.”

“Go alang wi’ ye, mon,” retorted Mrs. Burns encouragingly; “a Scotsman, and a Highlander besides, is ne’er too old to——”

“To learn,” interrupted Gilbert brightly, swinging the old man to the middle of the floor. “Let her go.”

“I havena danced for years,” said Souter apologetically. Carefully knocking the ashes out of his pipe he deposited it in the pocket of his capacious



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waistcoat and proceeded to divest himself of his coat. "Ye ken I was the champion dancer of my clan, Clan McDougal, when I was a young lad," he announced boastingly. "An' mony a time I have cheered an' amused the lads, while tentin' on the fields of Culloden, before the big battle. An' that reminds me o' a guid——"

"Never mind the story," said Gilbert impatiently. "Gie us a dance."

After a few preliminary movements Souter caught the swinging measure of the dance, and once started he limbered up surprisingly. On he danced nimbly, and untiringly, soon ably proving to his delighted audience that he had not forgotten his old-time accomplishment. "I'll show these Lowlanders what a Highlander can do," thought the old man proudly. Panting with excitement and eagerness he failed to hear the metallic patter of horses' hoofs drawing near the cottage. Nearer and nearer they came unheeded by all save one.

From his seat by the fireplace, where he sat in melancholy silence, Robert heard the sound, but gave it no heed. Suddenly it ceased. He raised his head to listen. Someone had surely stopped at the gate, he thought, straining his ears eagerly, but the noise of the fiddle and the dancing drowned all sound from without. He glanced quickly at the smiling faces of the others as they good-naturally watched the dancer. "I must hae been mistaken," he mut-



tered uneasily. Suddenly he leaned forward, grasping his chair hard; surely he had heard his name faintly called. He listened intently. Yes, there it was again; this time the voice was nearer. A woman's voice, too. What could it mean? He rose to his feet, his heart thumping fiercely, his muscles alert and tense, his eyes fixed on the door, his mind filled with gloomy presentiment.

At that moment an imperative knock sounded loudly through the room, and almost at the same time the door flew open violently, and Jean Armour impetuously dashed in. Closing the door quickly behind her she leaned back against it, pale and exhausted. Her riding habit of green and gold was splashed and discolored with mud. The large hat with its gleaming white plume hung limply over her shoulder, while her black disheveled hair streamed over her face and down her back in bewildering confusion. She had evidently ridden fast and furious, for she stood there with her eyes closed, her hand on her heart, gasping for breath.

Quickly Mrs. Burns led the exhausted girl to a seat. In a few moments she raised her drooping head and with wild frightened eyes searched the room till her gaze fell on Robert, who was leaning white and speechless against the fireplace, a great fear in his heart.

She rose quickly and going to him said in a tense, rapid whisper, "Robert, my father knows all, but



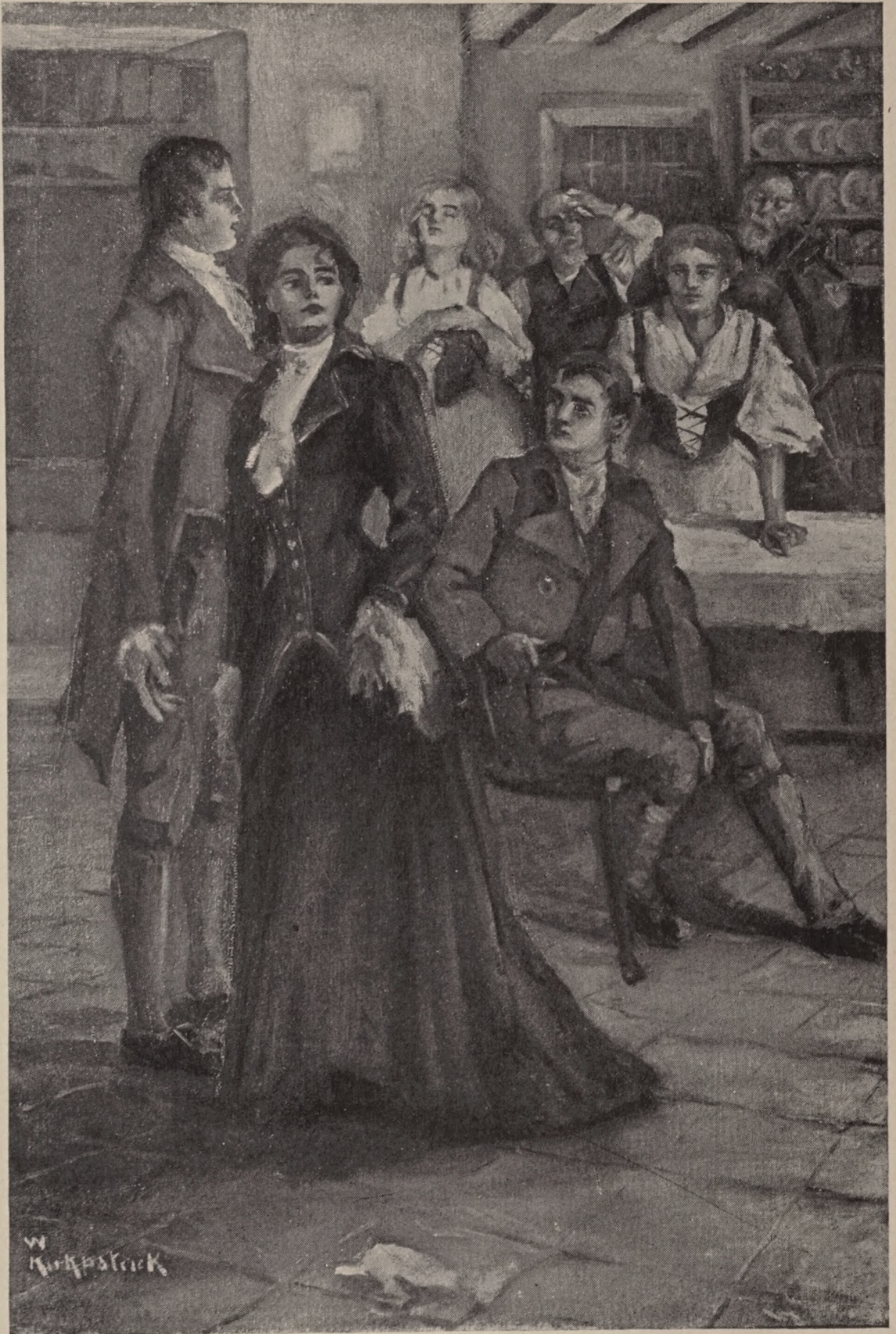
through no fault of mine. Some idle gossip reached his ear to-day, and when he returned home and learned my condition his rage was terrible. He cursed you like a madman, and would have done me bodily harm had I remained within sight. But I feared for my life, and fled before I had explained the truth to him. I have come to you to protect me."

He listened to her in stony silence. The blow had fallen so suddenly, so unexpectedly, it found him totally unprepared to ward off its paralyzing effects. He tried to speak, but the words refused to leave his parched tongue. He felt benumbed and cold, all the blood in his body seeming to have suddenly congealed. As he stood there with the eyes of all riveted upon him he left like the veriest criminal that walked the earth.

For a moment there was a tense silence. Jean stood there anxiously gazing into Robert's stricken face, as he vainly strove to utter a sound. Mary had watched the little scene before her in growing wonder and alarm and now leaned back against the wall, her heart beating with some unknown, nameless fear. What did this highborn lady want with her laddie? she asked herself jealously.

Mrs. Burns stood grimly waiting for some explanation of the scene she had just witnessed, but had not heard nor understood. "Robert, my son," she said finally, her voice cold and firm, "what does Squire Armour's daughter want of ye?" There





“ ‘She is my wife, mither.’ ”







was no answer. "What is she to ye, Robert?" she sternly insisted. Slowly he raised his head. As she saw his wild and haggard face, from which all the life and youth had fled, she started back in horror, a startled exclamation on her lips.

With a despairing, heart-broken look at Mary's wondering face, he bowed his head and falteringly uttered the fatal words, "She is my wife, mither."

Had a thunderbolt from a clear sky unroofed the humble cot, it would not have created the consternation, the terror which those few words struck to those loving hearts.

Mrs. Burns was the first to rally from the shock. "Your wife?" she repeated incredulously, looking from one to the other.

With a cry of grief and pain Mary sank weak and trembling into a chair, like a deer wounded unto death. She gazed at them heart-brokenly, while her little hands nervously fluttered about her face. No, no, he could not mean it. They were only joking, surely. "Not that, Robbie, ye dinna mean that, dearie?" she gasped piteously, holding out a beseeching hand to him. His bowed head bent lower.

"Do ye mean ye have legally married this lass?" asked Gilbert eagerly. Mary would be free then, he thought wildly. Free to be wooed and won.

"We were married a few weeks ago," answered Robert dully. "I had not the courage to tell ye before."



“Besides,” interposed Jean, arranging her disordered toilet, “I wished to keep the marriage from my father for a—a time.” She blushed crimson.

“I willna believe my son ever married ye of his own free will,” cried Mrs. Burns bitterly, “fine rich lady that ye are. He loves only that sweet lass, Mary Campbell.” Quickly she reached Mary’s side, and, raising the stricken child in her motherly arms, she kissed her tenderly and pressed the golden head gently against her loving heart.

Jean looked at them, a look of resentment in her flashing eyes. “I know that full well,” she answered sullenly. “I know Robert hasn’t married me because he wanted to, but because——” she looked down shame-faced. “Because there was no alternative. Now you know the truth,” she concluded bitterly.

“Ye shameless creature!” cried Mrs. Burns, her eyes blazing with indignation. “Ye have trapped him into this marriage, but ye shall na stay beneath this roof, ye limmer,” and she glared at the flushed defiant girl in righteous anger.

“Mither, mither!” cried Robert distractedly, “dinna, for God’s sake; she is my wife in truth, an’ she must stay wi’ me noo till I can prepare anither hame for her. Dinna make it harder for me.” He gazed pleadingly in his mother’s stern and angry face.

Mary pressed her lips to the quivering cheek. “Mistress Burns,” she said softly, “what is to be,



will be. I forgive them both wi' all my heart." She paused and sighed with gentle resignation. Then she continued, "An'—an' I hope they will both find peace in their new life." She turned quietly to Jean, who was nervously tapping her whip against her skirt. "I ken ye'll make Robert a good wife," she said earnestly. "So dinna let any thought o' me sadden your heart, or—or yours, Robert." She turned and looked at him tenderly. "I—I forgive ye," she whispered. Turning to Mrs. Burns again, she continued pleadingly, "Ye must welcome Robert's wife to her new hame, Mistress Burns. We all maun make this a merry hame-comin' for—the—bride." Her plaintive voice broke abruptly, and the burning tears welled up to her eyes, but she dashed them quickly away and continued bravely, a pathetic little smile hovering about her trembling lips, "I'll go out noo an' make some fresh tea for ye, and ye'll all stay right here, till I come back, an' Donald shall play for ye again—an' we'll—all—be—sae merry—won't w-we? I'll bring it w-when—it's quite—ready." She smiled at them through her tears. Then she took the teapot from the dresser and softly left the room.

"God bless her brave and noble heart," breathed Robert brokenly.

As she left the room Mrs. Burns drew herself sternly erect, and after a moment's hesitation turned slowly to Jean. "I bid ye welcome to Mossgiel Farm," she said coldly. "I am sorry I spoke so



bitterly to ye just noo. I—I will try to love ye as Robert's wife, but noo I—I can only think o' Mary an' her sorrow. I'll leave ye for a bit; Mary may need me." Her voice faltered and broke, and with a sob of grief she hurriedly left the room.



## CHAPTER XI

EVER since the morning she had received her marriage lines Jean had been trying to summon up sufficient courage to tell her father the whole truth about her secret marriage to Robert, to throw herself upon his mercy, but each time when she had approached him in fear and trembling, her courage had ignominiously failed her. She knew only too well her father's irascible temper and uncertain moods. And so days passed into weeks and still she procrastinated, but she knew she could not conceal from his observing eyes her condition much longer. But whether to confess all and run the risk of being thrown from her father's door like some abandoned outcast, or to contrive some excuse to leave home to pay a visit to some friend, and then, when it was all over, to return, that was the question which disturbed her waking thoughts. If she did the latter, she thought, she could easily have her marriage annulled and no one would be the wiser. But did she really want to have her marriage annulled? she asked herself thoughtfully. She didn't understand herself at all these days. He had strangely stirred her heart at their last meeting, to its very depths. She knew he did not love her, that he



loved the little dairymaid, but almost imperceptibly a great change was taking place in her feelings toward him. At times a great longing came over her to go to him, throw herself at his feet and beg to share his hardships, his poverty, with him. But she had not the courage, and so she battled with the conflicting emotions that constantly beset her day and night. Her temper soon became moody and uncertain, she was in constant fear of her mother's anxious, watchful eyes, and yet she felt she would go daft if she remained alone in her chamber with her disturbing thoughts. So day after day she could be found in her saddle madly galloping over the country, trying to get away, far away, from her trouble. But all in vain; it was always before her; there was no escaping it. But at last the day came when she knew she must make her decision, and almost in desperation she decided on her course of procedure. Hastily galloping home, she left her horse at the door, and going to her room, scribbled a short note to her father and left it on the table in his study. Then she had slipped guiltily past the room where her mother sat peacefully sewing, and sped swiftly along the hall to the door. As she reached it, it burst inward and she staggered back half fainting, for there on the threshold stood her father, his face white with rage, his jaw set and determined. He seized her roughly by the arm, and thrusting her back into the house, had taken one understanding look at her figure in its



tight-fitting habit, then with an outburst of bitter anger and shame he cursed her and the author of her disgrace, cursed her like a madman, cursed her till he was spent with the force of his passion. She tried to explain, to tell him the truth, that she was a wife, but the words froze on her lips. His words and manner struck terror to her very soul; she feared for her very life's safety. With all her despairing strength she freed herself from his clutch and stood cowering, panting, her hands raised to shield herself from the blow she expected every moment to fall on her defenseless body from the insane man. As he approached her with hand up-raised, she gave one quick shriek, one wild look around and darting under his arm reached the door. Quickly she opened it and sped like a swallow to the side of her waiting horse. With one bound she was on his back, and away she galloped like the wind, leaving her astonished father standing in the doorway shaking his fist after her in impotent anger.

She had given rein to her horse, not heeding or caring where he took her. Her one and only thought was to get away, far away; so she rode on and on, over brook and brush, through bog and mire till gradually her fear had subsided, and, reining in her horse, she looked around, and with a thrill of joy and wonder she saw Mossgiel Farm in the distance. Surely fate had guided her horse's footsteps in this direction, she thought eagerly. Her



course was clear now, she would go to him, to her husband, he would protect her. So she had continued her journey to the cottage, where she brought naught but misery and sorrow to its inmates.

As Mrs. Burns left the room Jean gazed after her in bitter silence. She wished she had not come. She knew she was not welcome. Far better to have faced her father's anger. "But the die is cast. I have made my bed," she told herself wearily. She realized how futile it was to repine over the past, and she felt too exhausted, too miserably unhappy to think of the future. She would stay here perhaps a night, then she didn't know, couldn't think what would happen. At all events she could never return to her father's home now. He had spurned her from him, and she was not wanted here. Nobody wanted her now. Her lips quivered convulsively and big tears of self-pity rolled quietly down her pale cheeks.

Gilbert looked uneasily from his brother's grief-stricken face to the weary, wan face of the bride. How long were they going to sit there side by side without a word to each other? he thought uneasily. He felt a great wave of pity well up in his heart for the unwelcome, unloved addition to their family. True she was mostly to blame for her present misfortune. Her imprudence, her misconduct had been well known to many, before his brother had gone to Mauchline to live. He felt sorry for Robert, too, even while he bitterly reproached him for being the



author of Mary's unhappiness. They must make the best of things now, he thought philosophically. "Ye had better take off your bonnet, lassie," he said kindly, breaking the oppressive silence. "Ye'll be staying here the night." She raised her head and looked at him with flashing eyes.

"Full well I know that all here hate and despise me," she burst forth bitterly, not heeding his request.

Robert slowly raised his head and looked at her. There was sorrow and compassion in his dark melancholy eyes. "Jean," he said quietly, "our lives have been linked together by a stern, inexorable fate. We have both been guilty of a grievous sin, and now we must face the results bravely." He rose and walked to her and stood humbly by her side. "I hope ye'll forgive me, Jean, for wreckin' your life and plungin' ye into sae much misery."

Slowly Jean bowed her head, her face flushing guiltily. Surely she had the more need to ask his forgiveness. She had not expected to find such nobility of character, and it moved her deeply.

"There is naught to forgive," she cried in a low stifled voice. "I alone am to blame. I am unfit, unworthy to be your wife. Oh, I'm so miserable, so unhappy," and she burst into tears.

Souter led old Donald silently out of the room. There was nothing either one could say to the wretched couple, so they sat outside and talked it all over in the way old men have. They had not



been seated long, however, when they espied coming toward them, at a furious gallop, a horse and rider. As they drew near Souter perceived with sudden apprehension that it was none other than Squire Armour. He rose anxiously to his feet.

“Do ye ken wha’ it is, Souter?” inquired Donald in a quavering voice.

“It’s Squire Armour himsel’,” whispered Souter cautiously.

“Ma certie!” ejaculated Donald, shaking his white locks in mild alarm.

“I’d better warn the lass,” said Souter hastily, as the Squire drew up to the gate. Going to the door he quickly told them of the newcomer, then turned to intercept the irate visitor, who was coming swiftly up the walk.

“Heavens, my father here!” cried Jean in a frightened whisper. “Oh, I dare not face his wrath. Protect me, Robert,” and she clung to him fearfully.

“Out o’ my way, mon!” they heard the harsh voice of Squire Armour shouting. “Out o’ my way,” and pushing aside the courageous little man he strode wrathfully into the room.

“Weel, I’ll stay and see the fun through,” said Souter to himself grimly.

“So, my lass,” cried the old Squire triumphantly, “I’ve found ye just where I expected ye’d be, in the arms o’ your dissolute lover. Come awa’, ye shameless bairn.”



He started toward her, but Robert passed her quickly behind him.

"Keep back, Squire Armour," he said firmly. "I'm nae a mild-mannered man, an' ye may learn it to your cost."

Squire Armour glanced at him savagely. "Dinna ye dare talk to me, ye libertine, ye blasphemous rhymster. Ye dare to stand there wi' my daughter, proclaiming her dishonor to my very eyes?"

"There is no dishonor, Squire Armour," replied Robert calmly, "for your daughter is—my wife."

"Your wife!" echoed the old man, staggering back in amazement. "I'll nae believe it. It's a lie. I'd rather see my daughter disgraced forever than be your wife."

"Father, are you mad?" gasped Jean in horrified accents.

"An' ye an Elder in the Kirk, a so-called 'God-fearin' man'!" cried Robert scathingly, his eyes blazing with scorn. "I tell ye, Squire Armour, she is my wife, an' all your bitter, unreasoning hatred o' me canna' alter that unhappy fact."

For a moment the old man stood gazing at them in helpless rage. Then he turned to Jean, his voice trembling with suppressed emotion. "What proofs have ye?" he asked hoarsely.

"I have my marriage lines, father," she answered quickly.

"Where were ye married?"



"Why, father, we——" began Jean hesitatingly.

"Was it in the Kirk?" he interrupted sternly.

"No," she faltered. "It was——"

"Not in the Kirk?" he cried, his voice rising menacingly. "Who was the minister? Who married ye?"

"There was no minister, father."

"Nae minister!" he exclaimed in horror.

"Wait, father, you don't understand," cried Jean quickly; "'twas a Scotch marriage; ye ken what that is—and," she bowed her head guiltily, "why it is. And here are my lines signed by Robert acknowledging me as his wife." She took from the bosom of her gown a folded paper which she handed to her father.

He read it through carefully. "This is na legal or binding," he exclaimed angrily.

"'Tis perfectly legal, Squire Armour," replied Robert calmly, "even if it is irregular, and is as binding as though we were married in Kirk."

"It shall be set aside," fumed the old man. "I will not have it so. Ye shall both renounce it, I tell ye."

"Oh, father," cried Jean tearfully, going to his side. "'Tis too late now; would you shame me in the eyes of the world?"

"Do these few written lines make your shame any the less?" he shouted wrathfully. "Will not all the neighbors know why he had to give them to ye? Ye would throw awa' your life on this poverty-



stricken, shiftless rhymster, but ye shall not do it; ye must give him up, do ye hear?" and he raised his arm menacingly.

"No, no, no, father," she exclaimed frantically, falling on her knees beside him; "I cannot give him up now, I cannot." After all the weary weeks of anxious fears and doubts she knew at last that she had found her heart, and now asked no greater happiness than to be allowed to remain with her husband to share his humble life, to be the mother of his family. All the old ambitious thoughts were gone forever. She wondered that they ever existed.

"Ye shameless bairn, ye must an' shall!" he replied fiercely. "This is the end o' it all," and he vindictively tore into little bits the paper Jean had given into his hands. "We'll hear nae mair of that, my lass, an' I swear ye shall never see Robert Burns again, make up your mind to that."

With a cry of despair Jean sank half fainting into a chair.

As he witnessed Squire Armour's fiendish act Robert's heart gave a great bound that sent the blood coursing madly through his veins. The marriage lines were destroyed; then he was free, free! Oh, the music in that word! Free to do as he wished. A sob of anguish caused him to look around at the kneeling figure of the unfortunate girl. Quickly the eager light died out of his face as he noted her suffering. Going to the kneeling girl he



raised her gently to her feet, and holding her by the hand faced the inhuman father. "Squire Armour, ye would condemn your ain flesh an' blood to shame an' disgrace because o' your hatred for me," he said quietly, "but it shall not be. I defy ye. Come, Jean, we will go to the Kirk at once and Daddy Auld will marry us." They turned to go, but the old man stepped between them and the door, his arms up-raised, his eyes wild and glaring.

"I'd sooner see her in her grave than bear the accursed name of Robert Burns," he cried with solemn intensity. "Great though her imprudence has been, she can still look to a higher, an' better connection than a marriage with ye." Turning to Jean he continued sternly, "Speak, lass, say that ye'll obey me, or the bitter curse o' your parents will haunt an' follow ye all the rest o' your days."

"Think of the disgrace, father," wailed the unhappy girl, clinging to his arm beseechingly.

"We'll forget and forgive it all if ye'll come back," he replied, the great love for his child revealing itself in his eager tones. "Ye're nae longer that man's wife. Come an' none will ever know o' your dishonor."

"My God, mon!" exclaimed Robert in horrified accents, "where is your father's pride, your ain honor, your manhood!"

But Squire Armour heeded him not. "Come, my



daughter, come," he said tenderly, leading the weak, wavering girl to the door.

"Ye canna expect to keep this a secret from the world, Squire Armour," cried Robert indignantly. "Matters have gone too far for that; soon your daughter's name will be blasted irretrievably, while mine will be coupled with that of blackguard. It must not be. Ye must let Jean go to the Kirk wi' me this very night or I shall inform the Elders in the Kirk."

"Ye'll have no time to turn informer, my laddie," snarled Squire Armour, turning on him fiercely; "for I mean to have ye brought before the Kirk sessions, an' ye'll be punished as ye deserve for the sin ye have committed, an' ye shall sit on the cutty stool, where all your friends an' neighbors can jeer an' scoff at ye. This very night will I send the parish officers after ye, Robert Burns. Ye can take this warning or no, just as ye please, but I hope they find ye here. Come, lass, we'll go hame to your mither, noo." He drew the terrified, half-fainting girl firmly through the door and down the path to the road.

"Ye're an old hypocrite!" hooted Souter, following them to the gate, where he stood shaking his fist angrily after the departing visitors, and shouting his frank opinion of the Squire in no mild or flattering terms.

"I alone am to blame," cried Robert despairingly,



as he watched them gallop madly away into the threatening night. "An' only the bitterest sorrow, the most poignant grief will I know until that wrong is righted."

"What will ye do noo, lad?" asked Mrs. Burns, breaking in upon the melancholy sadness which enveloped him like a pall. (She had entered the room in time to hear Squire Armour's parting injunction.) "Ye heard what the Squire threatened. Oh, dinna disdain the littleness of prudence, my son."

"I willna, mother," replied Robert dully, after a pause. "I have decided to go awa' from Mossgiel."

"Go awa'?" she repeated fearfully. "Nay, nay, laddie, ye mustna! I fear for ye in your present state o' mind."

"I must, mother," he answered wildly. "I willna sit on the cutty stool to be made the laughing stock o' the whole neighborhood, to bring shame on ye all." He walked restlessly up and down the room as he continued feverishly, "I willna stay here to skulk from covert to covert under all the terrors of a jail, for I ken that in a little while the merciless pack of the law will be baying at my heels like bloodhounds." He turned to her suddenly, "Mother, I mean to leave Scotland, perhaps forever."

"Oh, nay, nay, my bairn; I canna, I willna, let ye go," answered his mother, clinging to him passionately.



"There, there, mither, dinna make it harder for me." He put his arm around her tenderly and pressed her to him for a moment. "Noo, mother," he said quietly, "will ye pack my chest? I have nae time to spare," and he led her gently to the door.

"Where will ye be goin'?" inquired Gilbert.

"To the Indies, to Jamaica," replied Robert quickly. "Ye ken Dr. Douglas has a place for me there as overseer of his plantation. He has offered it to me mony times." He turned in nervous haste to his mother, who stood in the doorway anxiously watching him. "Hurry, mither, please, I am in torture o' mind."

"Very well, laddie," she answered sorrowfully. "God will direct your footsteps aright," and she closed the door behind her and quickly made her way to his chamber.

"Will ye see Mary before ye go, Robert?" asked Gilbert.

He felt an infinite pity for his brother, who was leaving behind him everything he held dear.

"If she will come to me," faltered Robert. "Tell her I'm goin' an' that I will go wi' a lighter heart if she bids me godspeed. Watch o'er an' protect her, Gilbert," he continued, placing his hand on his brother's shoulder. "An' I hope one day she may forget faithless Robert Burns, an'—an' ye, Gilbert, will be made happy." He turned away as he finished, grief gnawing at his heart.



An eager light flashed in Gilbert's eyes as he answered fervently, "I would lay doon my life to serve her," and with a quick look into the averted face he quietly left the room.

Mechanically Rob took his bonnet from the peg and throwing his long plaid around him went out into the air, and silently, sorrowfully he stood there watching the gloomy clouds that hung low in the heavens through eyes misty with tears. His soul was filled with unutterable sorrow at the coming parting, with dread of the unknown future to be passed alone in a strange, inhospitable foreign land. Oh, the agony of that thought, alone! Suddenly there came floating softly, peacefully, borne on the back of the south wind, which was blowing gently against his face, the alluring, seductive voice of the Goddess Muse. Insistently she urged her way into the dulled and listless ear of the grief-stricken man. Not for long was she denied admission, however. With a cry of joy, that even in that dreaded hour of parting his Goddess had not deserted him, he eagerly opened the book he held in his hand, his favorite book, "Tristram Shandy" by Sterne, and wrote quickly, lovingly on the flyleaf the impassioned words which were being whispered in his ear. Hungrily the pencil sped over the paper, till, with a sigh of regret, he dropped his hand, the voice was hushed, the message was finished. As he stood there eagerly reading his verses by the light which streamed through



the window, the door softly opened and Mary came swiftly to his side, her pure face pitiful in its child-like sorrow.

“Is it true ye are gang awa’ frae Scotland, Robbie?” she asked breathlessly. He bowed his head. “Oh, my heart beats heavy for ye, laddie.” There was infinite compassion in her voice. “But ye maun be brave noo if ever ye were.” She nestled her little hand in his. He clasped it fervently.

“O, Mary, my Highland lassie!” he cried passionately, “I want to hear ye say before I go that ye forgive me for the sorrow I have brought into your pure young life.”

“Hush, laddie,” she answered softly, “there is naught to forgive; ye had to do your duty like an honorable mon. I hae been very happy wi’ ye, laddie, an’ the memory o’ that happiness will be wi’ me always.” She leaned against him for a brief moment, then slowly drew herself away and looked tenderly up into his face. “In this sad parting hour,” she faltered, “I can tell ye without shame that I love ye wi’ a’ my being, an’ will until I dee.”

“Heaven bless ye, Mary,” he whispered brokenly. “The thought of your love will gie me courage to bear my exile bravely.”

“Exile!” she repeated shuddering. “Oh, what a drear word, to think ye must be exiled in your noble youth, that ye maun leave your hame, your country,



to live alone in some foreign clime." The tears streamed down her pallid cheeks. "We will a' miss ye sair, lad," she continued bravely, "and we will pray for ye, an'—an'—oh, 'twill be sae hard to say good-by, perhaps forever." She threw her arms about his neck and clung to him passionately.

He held the weeping child in his strong, loving embrace, his face close to hers. "Oh, why was I born, only to bring sorrow, pain an' disgrace to those I hold dear?" he cried in an agony of grief and remorse. "Bitterly am I atonin' for my act o' imprudence; an exile, a failure," he gave a mirthless little laugh; "aye, a failure, for e'en the hopes of success held out to me have a' vanished in disappointment. Oblivion has enveloped me in its darkening pall, for whichever way I turn naught but darkest gloom, with not e'en a ray of light, meets my wretched gaze." A flash of lightning pierced the darkness, followed shortly by a heavy, prolonged roll of thunder. She nestled closer to his side.

"Be not discouraged, laddie," she said; "'tis always darkest before dawn, an' who kens what may yet happen?"

"Ah, nae, nae," he interrupted with a despairing shake of his head, "e'en the elements conspire against me, for I maun face this coming storm on foot to reach Greenock. 'Tis all a part of my just punishment." The wind had risen and with it a driving mist



which soon enveloped them in its damp embrace. But they heeded it not.

“Bide a wee, dinna go to-night,” she pleaded, while the wind tossed her tangled curls seductively around his neck and in his sorrowing face. “Listen to the wind. Oh, ’tis a bad night to start on a journey,” and she clung to him tighter, her skirts flapping about his limbs like some live thing, thrilling him by their touch.

“Before ye came out, lassie,” he replied quietly, stilling the tumult in his heart, “I wrote some verses in this book as a parting song; how appropriate they are for this occasion ye will see. Listen,” and holding the book up to the light he began to read:

“The gloomy night is gathering fast,  
Loud roars the wild inconstant blast;  
Yon murky cloud is foul with rain,  
I see it driving o’er the plain;  
Chill runs my blood to hear it rave,  
I think upon the stormy wave,  
Where many a danger I must dare,  
Far from the bonnie banks of Ayr;  
’Tis not the surging billows’ roar,  
’Tis not that fatal deadly shore,  
Tho’ death in every shape appear,  
The wretched have no more to fear;  
But round my heart the ties are bound,  
That heart transpierced with many a wound;  
These bleed afresh, these ties I tear,  
To leave the bonnie banks of Ayr.”

The wind had risen rapidly and the old beech tree



was shrieking and groaning overhead as its branches strove like maniac arms with the tempest. The Ayr could be plainly heard roaring its diapason on its rocky banks in the darkness below, while the thunder crashed overhead and the luried glare of lightning ever and again lit up the yard.

Unheeding its warning he continued, his melancholy sonorous voice, with its mournful cadences, floating out with passionate longing, filling his listener with unutterable sadness:

“Farewell, old Coila’s hills and dales,  
Her heathy moors and winding vales;  
The scenes where wretched fancy roves,  
Pursuing past unhappy loves.  
Farewell my friends, farewell my foes,  
My peace with thee, my love with those;  
The bursting tears my heart declare,  
Farewell the bonnie banks of Ayr.”

As his voice died away he heard the sound of sobbing, and looked up, to see his mother standing in the doorway.

“Come awa’, lad, come in out of the night air!” she called tenderly, controlling her sobs.

Silently they entered the cottage. Robert crossed the room to his brother’s side.

“Gilbert,” he said quietly, “ye take the songs an’ verses ye will find on my table an’ send them to Mr. Aiken. Mayhap they will bring you in a bit o’ money to help ye in your struggle wi’ poverty, an’ forgive



me that I maun leave ye to battle wi' misfortune alone." Turning to Mary he continued, lovingly, "Mary, lass, will ye accept my Bible as a parting gift?" She looked at him with shining eyes. "Ye'll find it in the oak box with the glass lid in the attic."

"I'll prize it for aye, Robert," she sobbed gratefully, pressing his hand, "an' our prayers will follow ye to that far distant land, where I hope success awaits ye."

He drew her to him gently and pressed a kiss on her pure brow. "Farewell, lassie, may ye be happy," he breathed fervently. Turning again to Gilbert he spoke rapidly, "Farewell, brother, give my love to the dear brothers an' sisters when they come hame." He shook his hand warmly.

"God keep ye, Robert," answered Gilbert quietly.

Gently Robert drew his weeping mother into his arms. Tenderly he pulled down the apron which she had flung over her head to hide her sorrow, and wiped away her tears. "Noo, mother," he whispered brokenly, "I—I maun say good-by; the day has drawn to its close an' I maun start on my journey to Greenock. Dinna greet, dear mither." He let her weep on unconstrainedly a few moments.

Finally her bitter sobbing ceased and looking up into his face she cried passionately, "I canna give ye up, my son, never to see ye again." She took his cheeks lovingly between her hands.

"Ye're making it hard for me to go, mither,"



he cried, utterly distracted. "But the die is cast, my hands are on the plow, an' I canna turn back noo. Ye ken there is naught but disappointment an' disgrace to look forward to here, an'——" Suddenly a loud cheer from outside the cottage interrupted him. They listened in silent wonder. Above the noise of the wind, which had risen to a gale, and the swish of the rain, which now beat in swirling gusts about the cottage, came the voices of Souter and Donald shouting and cheering like boys on a frolic. Quickly they opened the door. A gust of wind dashed the rain fiercely in their faces. Through the mist and gloom they could vaguely make out the outlines of a coach standing at the gate, which had approached unheard in the storm.

"Robert, Robert!" cried Souter, looming up out of the darkness and looking decidedly weather-beaten. "'Tis news I have, great and glorious news."

"News?" they all repeated in wonder.

"What is it, mon?" asked Rob, trembling with excitement.

"It can speak for itsel'," replied Souter gleefully, "for here it is." He pointed behind him. They looked down the path and saw rapidly approaching the door a tall man, enveloped in a long cloak, escorted by a servant in livery. At that moment the light fell on his wet face and they started forward in amazement.



"Lord Glencairn?" cried Robert incredulously, his heart throbbing with a strange new-born hope.

"Aye, my lad, and near drowned," laughed the visitor genially. Robert grasped his outstretched hand and drew him to the door.

With words of welcome and delight they made room for him to enter. Quickly he removed his wet cloak from his shoulders and threw it to his servant, who hung it beside the fire, while descanting on the inclemency of the weather. Nervously and anxiously they waited for the great man to speak his errand.

Presently he turned from the fireplace, and, addressing Robert, he said brightly, "Well, Mr. Burns, you see I have not forgotten you."

"Oh, my lord," faltered Robert, his face white with suppressed feeling, "I—I had despaired of seein' you mair; do ye—bring me—hope? Is it—I—I——" his faltering voice stopped abruptly, but his eager eyes continued to search the noble face which was looking so kindly into his, as if he would draw the news from him.

"It is good news," answered Lord Glencairn, smiling brightly, "and you are famous; yes, my lad, your poems are at last published and already have become the rage in Edinburgh; the name of Robert Burns is on the tongue of all, high and low, prince and peasant."

"Thank God," cried Mary softly, a look of rapture on her face.



Mrs. Burns turned excitedly to her son, her hands clasped nervously. "Oh, laddie, laddie, ye're a great mon, noo!" she exclaimed proudly.

For a moment Robert stood there speechless, a look of incredulous wonder on his face. "My lord," he faltered at last, "can it be true, what you're telling me, that my songs are—accepted, read an'—praised in Edinburgh?" Lord Glencairn bowed. "Oh, sir," he continued, with a nervous catch in his voice, "it seems too good to be true, too good."

Gradually the warm color came back to the pale face, the hurried breathing, which seemed almost to smother him, became calmer, the nervous, excited tension relaxed, and, with a smile of rapture and content on his upturned face, he exclaimed fervently, "At last my hopes and ambitions are realized, the bright sunlight of success has crowned my efforts; my verses are known an' loved in Edinburgh! Oh, do ye hear that, my loved ones?" He stretched out his arms lovingly to them. "Nae mair poverty for us noo, mither, nae—nor disappointments." He turned to Lord Glencairn, who was being assisted into his cloak. "Oh, sir, I canna tell ye what is in my heart," he continued earnestly, "but 'tis overflowing wi' love an' gratitude to ye."

"There, there, my lad, time is precious," replied Lord Glencairn kindly, buttoning up his cloak. "'Tis late and we have far to go and the postchaise



is awaiting us. I came here not only to bring you news, Mr. Burns, but to take you back with me to Edinburgh." He laughed heartily at the look of startled amazement that appeared on the faces before him.

"To Edinburgh!" gasped Robert unbelievably.

"Aye, lad," replied his lordship earnestly, his eyes flashing with admiration for the modest young genius. "To Edinburgh, where fame and fortune await you, where society stands with outstretched arms to receive you as a conquering hero come to claim his own. To the capital city, where all unite in paying homage to the wonderful genius of Robert Burns, our Scottish Bard. Will you come?" and he held out his hand invitingly to the wondering lad, who was gazing at him, his soul in his eyes.

"Am I dreaming?" he cried slowly, looking about him for some confirmation of his fears. "Go to Edinburgh wi' ye, sir, as the Bard of Scotland? O God, can this be true? My wildest hopes ne'er held out such dreams o' greatness, such happiness." His voice vibrated with feeling. He paused and took a deep breath, then he continued joyfully, all the sorrows of the past forgotten in his excitement, "A few moments ago, my lord, I was bidding farewell to these, my loved ones, forever. I was about to start for the Indies, a wretched exile, a disappointed failure, and noo fate once mair alters my destiny." With a glad laugh he seized Lord Glencairn's out-



stretched hand, and, turning to his loved ones, he cried, his voice ringing out clear and strong, a conscious thrill of pride running through it, "Nae more tears, mither, except those of happiness, nae more sorrow or care, for I can leave ye all wi' a light heart noo, wi' joy instead o' sadness. 'Tis true I go from here an outcast, but I'll return to ye a hero."



## BOOK II

### CHAPTER XII

THE scene that opened on our hero in Edinburgh was altogether new, and in a variety of other respects highly interesting, especially to one of his disposition of mind. To use an expression of his own, he “found himself suddenly translated from the veriest shades of life,” into the presence, and indeed into the society, of a number of persons previously known to him by report as of the highest distinction in his country. From those men of letters in general his reception was particularly flattering. And they interested themselves collectively and individually in the cultivation of his genius.

In Edinburgh literature and fashionable society are a good deal mixed. Our Bard was an acceptable guest in the gayest and most elevated circles, and received from female beauty and elegance those flattering attentions above all others most grateful to him. A taste for letters is not always conjoined with habits of temperance and regularity, and Edinburgh at this period contained perhaps an uncommon proportion of men of considerable talents, devoted to social excesses, in which their talents were wasted and debased.



Robert entered into several parties of this description with his usual vehemence. His generous affections, his ardent eloquence, his brilliant and daring imagination fitted him to be the idol of such associations. The sudden alteration of his habits of life operated on him physically as well as morally. The humble fare of the Ayrshire peasant he had exchanged for the luxuries of the Scottish metropolis, and naturally the effect of this change could not be inconsiderable. He saw the danger, and at times formed resolutions to guard against it, but he had embarked on the tide of dissipation and was borne along its stream. Some six months after his triumphant entrance into the city he had returned to Mossgiel for a fleeting visit to his home, and to assist his brother, who had taken upon himself the entire support of their aged mother, and who was struggling with many difficulties on the farm of Mossgiel. It will easily be conceived with what pleasure and pride he was received by his mother, his sisters, and brothers. He had left them poor and friendless; he returned to them high in public estimation and easy circumstances. He returned to them unchanged in his ardent affections, and ready to share with them to the uttermost farthing the pittance that fortune had bestowed. He had been keenly disappointed not to find Mary there. He learned, to his sorrow, that she had gone back to the Highlands shortly after he left for Edinburgh. He felt that she was



lost to him now forever, for, while his heart prompted him to hurry to her side, reason told him that the visit would but fill her cup of sorrow to the brim. For, believing as he did, that he was still bound to Jean in spite of the destruction of her marriage lines, he knew he would only have to part from her again, to leave her there with her sad thoughts, her loneliness, while he returned to the gay life, where it was so easy to forget or at least to still the voice of sorrow. Having remained with them a few days he proceeded again to Edinburgh, first stopping off at Mauchline to call at the home of Squire Armour, only to be met with curses and to be driven from the door by the stern, unyielding man.

Robert returned to Edinburgh, his heart filled with bitterness and sorrow. For a while he brooded over his troubles, which threatened to plunge him into a state of extreme melancholy. But at last resentment and anger crowded out all other thoughts, and it was not long before he succeeded in drowning recollection in the midst of the society and dissipation of the metropolis.

A year passed by, during which time he had vainly tried to get word to Jean Armour. He had heard that she had given birth to twins, and the thought that they were without the protection of a father's name filled him with grief and remorse. Time and again he had written her, only to have his letters returned unopened. Finally he had received a letter



from her father, stating that "the children were dead and that Jean had quite forgotten him, and was about to be joined in wedlock with a neighboring rich farmer; that now he hoped Robert would leave him and his daughter in peace," etc., etc. He laid down the letter with a thrill of joy stirring his blood. Free at last! He had done his duty as a man of honor, and now, after all the bitter heartache and the long separation, he was free to marry his little sweetheart. "Oh, thank God!" he cried aloud, in an ecstasy of joy. "Thank God, the miserable tangle in our lives will soon be straightened." He had long entertained a desire to visit those parts of his native country which were so celebrated in the rural songs of Scotland, and he would now gratify that desire with Mary's home as the objective point. As soon as arrangements could be made he started for the Highlands on horseback, accompanied by a friend, one Will Nichol, and, his fame having preceded him, they were royally entertained on their journey through the country. Finally they arrived in Dornoch, where Mary was living quietly with her sister, and soon the long parted lovers were clasped in each other's arms. Later that day he told her the glorious news of his release, his freedom from all ties, told her of his undying love, and swore that never again should they be parted in this life. And Mary with a prayer of thankfulness in her faithful heart, blushing gave her willing con-



sent to a speedy marriage. The next day they all returned by easy stages to Edinburgh. Mrs. Dunlop, an old friend of Robert's, took the country maiden under her protecting wing and gave her a home until the marriage could be solemnized, the date having been set one month from the time of their arrival.



## CHAPTER XIII

JOHN ANDERSON, the proprietor of the "Bull's Head," stood gazing wrathfully upon the scene of disorder which met his eyes as he opened the door of the sitting-room of his distinguished lodger's apartments. It was early evening, and still that lodger remained in bed, although he had been called at different intervals throughout the day by the irate, though kind-hearted, landlord himself. "Dear—dear—dear," he muttered to himself, as he arranged the furniture, "I'll just give Robbie a bit o' my mind." He went to the door of the sleeping apartment and looked in. "Sleepin' like a bairn," he said softly, "an'—an' wi' his boots on. Ma certie!" He raised his hands in horror. "Weel, I'm glad ye're nae under the bed. Ah, weel, young blood must hae its course. I mind I was young mysel', an' if I do say it I could drink mair whusky than any mon in the toon. Oh, those were happy days," and he sang softly to himself, as he continued his work about the room:

"We are na fou'  
We're nat that fou',  
But just a droppie in our ee.  
The cock may crawl,  
The day may daw',  
An' ay we'll taste the barley bree."



A knock on the door interrupted his song.

"Weel, who is it?" he called impatiently.

"Open the door," replied a female voice eagerly.

"A lassie," exclaimed John in amazement. "Oh, Robbie, ye devil." He swung open the door and stood back to allow the gorgeously dressed lady to enter the room. Her dress of rich purple brocaded silk, cut in the extreme of fashion, rustled stiffly over the polished floor. Her head with its powdered wig was held haughtily erect as she surveyed the room with sparkling black eyes that nervously took in her surroundings, through the tiny holes in the black mask which concealed her face.

"I—I thought—isn't Mr. Burns at home?" she stammered uneasily.

"Weel, what may ye be wantin' wi' Mr. Burns?" asked John cautiously. He had been bothered to death with answering the questions of the silly women who flocked to the parlors of the inn in hopes of seeing their idol.

The lady turned on him sharply. "None of your business, my good man," she retorted haughtily. "How dare you question me, sirrah?"

John was quite taken aback by the imperious tones, but he still had his suspicions. "Weel, I thought perhaps ye were one o' the artless bonnie wenches who were here last night wi' the lads makin' merry till the wee sma' hours. If ye are——" he paused significantly.



She flashed him an angry look. "Make your mind easy on that score, my good fellow," she retorted icily. "I have called to interview Mr. Burns on an important matter. Is he at home?"

"Aye; he is in there asleep," replied John, pointing to a door beside the large book cabinet, which nearly occupied one side of the room.

"Asleep!" she repeated incredulously. "Lud, he retires uncommon early for a gallant," and there was a note of disappointment in her deep contralto voice.

"Early is it?" said John, with a knowing smile. "Faith, he hasna been up this day."

"What?" she ejaculated in horror. "Not all day? Then you must awaken him immediately. I must have speech with him at once," and she spread her voluminous draperies over the wide lounge and calmly seated herself. "Do you hear?" she cried impatiently, as John made no move.

"I hae excellent hearin', mum," replied John carelessly, "but I ken when I'm well off, an' I hae nae desire to feel the toe o' Robert's boot."

"A pest on your stubbornness, fool," she cried angrily, springing to her feet.

"An' I hae my doubts o' a lass who comes to a mon's lodgings at night," continued John, resenting her impatience. "It's na respectable."

She looked him over insolently, then shrugged her shoulders. "I protest, landlord," she replied, in



a mocking tone, "I am quite respectable, even if I am here unchaperoned. But, Lud, I like not conventionalities, and this adventure suits my madcap spirit well." She walked to the door of the sleeping chamber and was about to open it, when his voice arrested her.

"I ken it all the time," he cried indignantly. "Ye're a brazen hussy."

"Landlord!" she gasped in astonishment.

"An' ye can leave my inn," continued John, now thoroughly aroused. "We are respectable, if ye are na."

"Peace, fool!" she exclaimed furiously. "I am Lady Glen——" she stopped and bit her lips angrily at the indiscreet slip of her tongue. Suddenly a daring thought entered her mind. One glance at his face told her that he had not caught the name. To think was to act with my lady. Then she continued glibly, "I am Lady Nancy Gordon, daughter of the Duke of Gordon, of Gordon Castle. It will be all over town in a day," she thought with malicious satisfaction.

John staggered back as though he had been shot. "Ye Lady Nancy?" he gasped in amazement. "Oh, my lady, I ask your pardon."

"'Tis not easily granted, numskull," replied the imperious beauty, her black eyes flashing dangerously. The sound of a carriage rolling over the cobble stones suddenly arrested her attention. For



a moment she listened intently, then, with a startled exclamation, she turned to John and said in a frightened whisper, "'Fore heaven! if it should be my husband—my father, I mean, in pursuit of me." She ran hastily to the window from where a view of the street could be obtained and threw open the casement.

"It would serve ye right, my lady," said John to himself.

"Great heavens! 'tis my uncle, Sir William Creech!" she gasped. Then she said aloud, "Landlord, 'tis my father, as I feared! Oons! what a scrape I'm in." She closed the shutter hastily.

"'Twill ruin your reputation to be found here at night, my lady," cried John concernedly, trotting nervously to the window.

"O Lud," she replied airily, "I'm not concerned over my reputation, 'tis already torn to ribbons by my dear friends. 'Tis my—my father's wrath I fear. He is like to do some mischief." An imperious knocking sounded on the door below.

"He has found ye, lassie," cried old John excitedly. "Go down to him; dinna let him find ye here in Robbie's chamber. Ye ken the blame will all fall on the lad," and he sought to escort her to the door, but she evaded his outstretched hand with laughing unconcern.

"Nay, nay, my good fellow. I protest, I will not see him," she exclaimed, with reckless abandon.



She would keep up the impersonation till the end. Another such chance to blast her enemy's reputation would not come to her in a lifetime, she thought wickedly. "Listen," she cried impetuously. "My father, the Duke of Gordon, while he admires the poetry of Mr. Burns, does not admire the man himself, consequently he did not send him an invitation to attend the masked ball which is given at Gordon Castle to-night," she explained glibly. "'Twas a monstrous insult to the Bard of Scotland, and I told my father so, and that I would not countenance it. Then I stole away, as I thought, unobserved, and came here to induce Mr. Burns to return with me. Once inside the castle my father will be forced to receive him graciously. Now, hurry, landlord, tell him to dress and we'll slip out quietly, and, with your connivance, elude my—father's vigilance." She watched him narrowly to note the effect of her story.

"My lady," replied John proudly, "the lad goes to Athol Castle to-night, so ye had better gang hame wi' your father." She gave a quick start of delighted satisfaction. So he was going after all. If she had only known that and felt sure of it, she might have spared herself this nerve-racking experiment, she thought impatiently.

The pounding had kept up incessantly, and now a stern, commanding voice called out for the landlord.

"He's calling me," said John nervously; "ye'd



better go doon an' explain a' to him," he told her pleadingly.

"Landlord, where the devil are you?" They could hear the heavy tread of feet walking about the rooms below.

"He's inside the house," whispered John, wringing his hands.

"O Lud, he seems most angry, doesn't he?" she said in a subdued voice. She had suddenly grown tired of the deception, and was eager now to get away. "I—I think perhaps 'twould be best if he—er—my father didn't find me here after all," she admitted. "I—I really dare not face his anger." She jumped up quickly, all her bravado vanished. "Get me out of this place, landlord, quick, quick!" she gasped, clinging to him. Oh, why had she come? Sir William would make such a disagreeable scene if he found her here.

"Into that room wi' ye!" cried John quickly, pointing to a small door in the opposite side of the room; "an' I'll get your father out o' the house."

"Why couldn't the old fossil have stayed at home?" she said to her angrily. "This promised to be such a romantic adventure, landlord," she said aloud, poutingly. "And now 'tis all spoiled. Plague take it. Hurry, landlord, and get my—father away, for I must return to the ball before my absence is noticed." She went into the room, her heart filled



with apprehension, and closed the door, which John promptly locked.

"Thank the Lord," he muttered with a sigh of relief. "I breathe easier." Going to the door leading to the hall, he listened for a moment. From below came the sound of clinking glasses. He closed the door quickly. The coast was clear now. His guidwife was waiting on the customer. He hurried across the room and was about to release his prisoner, when he heard the door of Robert's chamber open. He turned quickly and found his lodger yawning in the doorway.

"Well, John Anderson, my Jo John," said he lazily, "what's all the row here, eh?"

John looked up guiltily. "Are ye up, laddie?" he stammered.

"Nay, John, I'm walkin' round in my bed," retorted Robert dryly. "Dinna ye think it's time for me to be up?" he asked. "What's the matter, mon? stand still, ye make me dizzy."

John was uneasily walking up and down, casting surreptitious glances at the door of the room which held the fair captive. "Oh, Johnny, my Jo John," laughed Robert as he caught sight of the old man's lugubrious countenance, "ye've been drinkin' too much Usqubaugh."

"Too much what, Robbie?" he asked nervously.

"Usqubaugh. Dinna ken what that is? It's whisky, whisky, whisky."



"Oh, I ken, laddie," replied John, smiling grimly. "Ye needna' repeat it; one whisky is enough."

"Not for me," laughed Robert, slapping him on the shoulder. "Ye dinna ken my capacity." The noise of a chair overturning in the next room arrested his attention.

"What's that?" he asked quickly.

"It's n—nothing," stammered John.

"There's somebody in that room," exclaimed Rob, putting his ear to the crack in the door. "I hear her walking around."

"Nay, nay, Rob, it's nobody," protested John, pushing him away.

"Oh, oh, John Anderson, my Jo John!" cried Rob, pointing an accusing finger at the flushed, embarrassed face of the old man, "I'm on to ye."

"For shame, Robbie, an' me wi' an old wife below stairs," he answered indignantly.

"Faith, I'll just find out who it is," chuckled Rob, going toward the door.

"Nay, nay, lad!" remonstrated John, holding him back. "Wait, I'll tell ye who it is."

"Ah, I knew it," ejaculated Rob triumphantly. "Who is it?"

"It's—it's the Bailie," faltered John.

"The Bailie? what's he doing in there?"

"Weel, he—he came to arrest ye for debt," glibly lied the old man. "So I told him to wait in there



till ye came hame, an' noo he's my prisoner ; that's a', Robbie."

Rob grasped his hand gratefully. "Ye're a true friend, John Anderson. Let me see, how much do I owe him?"

John backed quickly away from him. "Nay, nay, laddie!" he said decidedly. "I havena anither penny."

"Neither have I," laughed Rob ruefully. "So I'll leave ye to get him out the best way ye can ; he's your prisoner, not mine. I'd like to pitch him down stairs. Come on, John, between us we ought to manage the old Shylock."

"Nay, nay, Robbie," he retorted dryly. "Take my word for it, we'd hae our hands full."

"Weel, I'll get into the rest of my clothes, for I'm due in society," yawned Rob, going to his room. "Get rid of him, John ; do what ye like with him ; he's no friend of mine," and he went in and closed the door behind him.

John softly followed him to the door and turned the key in the lock. "I'll take nae chances," he said grimly.

"Good-evening," said a sweet voice timidly. He turned around and with a gasp of astonishment beheld a young girl standing in the doorway. Suddenly he gave a great start. Could his eyes deceive him? Was that beautiful creature in the long white opera cloak, her golden locks piled in a gorgeous



mass high upon her little head, really the barefooted lass he had seen only a few days ago, in her short skirt of plaid?

"Mary Campbell, is it yoursel', lass?" he finally gasped.

"Aye, 'tis really me," laughed Mary happily. "I'm goin' to the ball at Athol Castle with Mrs. Dunlop. I wanted Robbie to see me in my gown before I went, so Mrs. Dunlop left me here, while she drove over to pick up Mrs. McLehose; then she'll return for me. Where is Robbie, John?"

"He's in there dressing, Mary, but whist, I've something to tell ye first."

"About Robbie?" she asked anxiously.

"Aye, there's the devil to pay here, Mary." The old man's face looked gloomy and perturbed. "There's a—a lady in that room."

"A—a lady!" gasped Mary in amazement, looking at the door of Robbie's chamber.

"Aye, Lady Nancy Gordon hersel'."

"Then it's true," cried Mary, sinking into a chair, a great fear tugging at her heart. "It's true, then, all the stories I hear, that Robert is bewitched wi' her. I wouldna' believe it before. Mrs. Dunlop says it isn't true, that Robbie hasn't changed, but noo what can I think? Oh, laddie, oh, laddie!" and she sank back pale and trembling.

"There, lassie, Robert doesn't care a penny for that lass," he said tenderly. "She is only a heartless



coquette, o'er fond of adventure," and he laid his wrinkled hand caressingly on the golden head. "Noo look here, Mary, ye mustna' expect Robert to be an angel all the time. He thinks only of ye, and he loves ye just as fondly, e'en if he does smile and make love to the ladies who throw themsel's at his feet. He would lose his popularity, ye ken. 'Tis only an amusin' pastime, lassie, an' but gives him inspiration for his poetry, so dinna' take it to heart. Ye ken Rob is highly sensitive, a most temperamental lad, who is very susceptible to the charms of the fair sex, but whist, Mary, he isn't marrying any of them. There is only one lassie who will be his wife noo, and she's nae far away from me this moment." And he nodded his head sagely.

"Why dinna' they leave him alone?" sighed Mary disconsolately. "'Tis very unmaidenly in them to seek for his favor so openly."

"Noo, lassie," said John seriously, "we maun get Lady Nancy out o' this scrape, for the house is watched noo by her father, who suspects her presence here."

He walked up and down the room for a few moments plunged in deep thought. All at once his face brightened.

"I have thought o' a scheme, lassie," he said suddenly. "Let Lady Nancy take this long cloak of yours; 'twill cover her o'er entirely; then she can



walk boldly out past her father; he will think 'tis ye, Mary, and will na' stop her. Ye're both of a height," and he regarded her with anxious eyes.

"Why should I help her?" said Mary, her heart still heavy and sore.

"For Robbie's sake," pleaded John. "Her father will blame the lad for it all; perhaps he will shoot him, and he an innocent man. Why, lassie, he doesna' even ken the lass is in the house."

"Doesna' ken it?" repeated Mary, smiling incredulously. "Why, John, Robert isna' blind. If she is in his room——"

"But she isna' in his room, Mary," interrupted John. "She's in there, scared to death," and he pointed to the door opposite.

"Oh!" comprehended Mary with a sigh of relief. "That's different. I'll help her noo, John," and she jumped eagerly to her feet, her face flushed and earnest.

"That's the girlie," replied John heartily. Going to the door, he opened it and whispered to Lady Nancy to come out.

"Lud, I thought you were never coming," she flashed as she hastily entered the room. She stopped short upon seeing Mary.

"This lady will help ye get away," said John, looking angrily at the bogus Lady Nancy.

"Where have I seen that face before?" Lady Glencairn asked herself nervously, looking closely





“Mary quickly divested herself of her mantle and threw it about the bare shoulders of the disdainful lady.”







into Mary's flushed, innocent face, that reminded her so guiltily of Lady Nancy Gordon herself.

Mary quickly divested herself of her mantle and threw it about the bare shoulders of the disdainful lady, who hastily drew the large hood over her elaborate court wig, entirely concealing it within its voluminous folds.

With a quick careless word of thanks to Mary, she walked to the door, and calling to John, who was quietly turning the key in Robert's door, to show her the way out, she swiftly left the room, and with wildly beating heart, passed her uncle at the outer door, and mingled her presence with the stream of gallant courtiers and laughing, gayly-dressed ladies that wended its boisterous way along the crowded thoroughfare.



## CHAPTER XIV

WHEN Mary found herself alone she sat down pensively in the big leather chair, feeling very sad and thoughtful. Of course she trusted Robert absolutely, but how could he really love such an ignorant little country girl like herself, when there were so many grand, rich, beautiful ladies surrounding him all the time and suing for his favors, even seeking him out in his own rooms? But her face brightened as she thought of what John had told her. "It isn't his fault if the women lose their hearts over him," he had said, and in her heart she felt she could not blame anyone for loving Robbie. She rose and softly approached his door. Then she paused. No, she would wait till he came and found her himself. But she did wish he would hurry and finish dressing before Mrs. Dunlop came back. She strolled aimlessly about the room looking with listless eyes at the collections of souvenirs and bric-a-brac which filled the mantels and covered the tables. She noted with wonder the profusion of ladies' gloves, kerchief, scarfs, a slipper or two and a motley collection of other articles littering the table. She picked up a beautiful pink mask and idly turned it over; on the back she read, "Dropped by Lady Nancy at the Charity Ball given in honor of the Prince of Wales." She put it down, her lips



trembling. He must prize it very highly, she thought with a pang of jealousy; but as she read the various inscriptions on the back of a number of the others, she smiled and told herself what a silly she was. Of course he couldn't be in love with all the owners of those many favors. She picked up the mask again and held it before her eyes. How funny to cover one's face in such a manner, she thought. She fastened the elastic behind her ear, and with a woman's curiosity wondered how she looked in it. She quickly spied the large cheval mirror in the cabinet. "How funny I do look," she said to herself with a little amused laugh, as she caught sight of her reflection. "Nobody would ever know me." As she drew closer to the mirror in pleased wonder her dancing eyes slowly wandered from the top of the glittering coil of her golden hair, dwelt for an instant in blushing modesty on the gleaming, bare shoulders, and rested in loving, blissful content on her simple trailing robe of ivory-tinted embroidered silk. She looked angelically lovely as she stood there innocently admiring her winsome reflection.

"Is that really the Highland Mary who used to wander barefooted through the glens and vales, the simple dairymaid who made butter for Colonel Montgomery?" she asked herself dreamily. "Am I awake, I wonder? How Souter Johnny would open his eyes if he could only see me noo in this



beautiful gown, carrying a fan an' wi' my hair done up high." She laughed gleefully but softly at the thought. "Wouldna' they be proud to see me such a grand lady." She walked stiffly across the room with all the dignity she could command, her chin held high and taking quick little pleased glances over her shoulder at her reflection. It was Mary's first long gown, and it was not to be wondered at, when in turning quickly around a chair she easily became entangled in her train, and with a little frightened gasp she suddenly found herself on her knees endeavoring to extricate her feet from the clinging mass of silk and linen in which they were enmeshed. Finally she succeeded in regaining her feet, but not until she had with extreme care seated herself did she breathe a sigh of relief. She eyed her train ruefully. "If I should fall doon before all the great people at the ball, I should be so ashamed," she said, sighing dismally. "They would all laugh at me. But Robert says I am nicer than anyone in all the world." She reveled in that thought an instant, then her face lengthened. "But I ken there is a difference, a great difference; I am only a simple country lass without any learnin' whatever, while Lady Nancy is——" she rose suddenly as a thought occurred to her, her hands clasped tightly together. "Suppose he should grow ashamed of his ignorant little country wife," she whispered with trembling lips; "it would break my heart in twain."



She held out her hands passionately toward her unseen lover. "Ye willna' ever regret makin' me your wife, will ye dear?" she whispered imploringly. "Ye willna' be sorry in years to come." Quickly her loving, trustful faith reasserted itself. "Nay, nay, my heart tells me ye willna', so I'll be foolish nae more. I'll tell him what a silly lass I've been an' how he'll laugh at my doubting fears." She took a step toward his door, when it opened and Robert came quickly into the room, dressed for the ball, looking very handsome in his plain and unpretending dress of blue homespun, for he still retained the same simplicity of manner and appearance that he brought with him from the country. He stopped in amazement as he came face to face with his unexpected visitor.

Mary with a thrill of joy at the sight of her lover waited eagerly for the words of praise which she knew her appearance would elicit, and for which she hungered, but as he stood looking at her so calmly, so coldly, her joy turned to wonder and fear. What was the matter? Didn't she please him? With a little gasp she put her hand nervously to her face. As it came in contact with the mask, which she had forgotten to remove, her heart gave a quick bound of relief. Of course! He didn't know her. "He doesna' ken who I am at all," she thought gleefully.

As his eyes rested upon the pink mask, Robert



gave a sudden start, then glanced quickly at the table. No, it wasn't there. So then this was Lady Nancy herself. He recognized her hair, her figure, and above all the mask. "So my haughty lady thinks it safer to play wi' fire incognito, eh?" he thought grimly. "Weel, I'll teach ye a lesson, my fine lady; ye need one badly." Then aloud, "I'm indeed honored, madam, by your presence here to-night," he said, bowing low before her.

Mary courtesied deeply. Oh, it was so exciting to be talking with her Robbie, and how surprised he would be when she unmasked.

"Haven't ye a word to say to me, fair lady?" continued Robert softly, as she stood silently before him.

"He'll sure ken my voice," she thought in trepidation; "if I could only talk like a lady." She wondered if she could imitate the haughty tones of Lady Nancy Gordon herself. She'd try. She seated herself languidly. "Then you don't recognize me?" she asked, disguising her lyric voice, as near as possible, in the lazy drawl of Lady Glencairn's voice.

He started and looked at her intently. It didn't sound like Lady Nancy at all, but who else could she be? he thought blankly. "Your voice sounds like—but nae, I maun be mistaken," he said doubtfully. "Nay, madam, I do not recognize you. Will you not remove——"

"What, my face?" laughed Mary. She had mar-



velously lost all trace of her country intonation.

"Oh, nay, sir! I'm too much attached to it."

"Well ye might be, fair lady!" replied Robert, "but why do ye hide your beauty so jealously?" He reached out his hand to lift the mask from her face, but, with a rippling laugh, she eluded him, and from behind the high-backed settle made reply.

"Be not impatient, Mr. Burns," she said saucily; "you shall see my face in good time, I warrant ye!" It must be Lady Nancy after all, he told himself.

"'Tis a promise of paradise, madam!" he cried fervently, entering into the spirit of adventure.

Mary looked at him reproachfully. Did he think she was really Lady Gordon? she wondered. The thought gave her pause. Well, she would find out how much he really cared for her, how much truth there was in the gossip she had heard. "Rumor sayeth, Mr. Burns, that ye are in love with the beautiful Lady Nancy Gordon; is that so?" she asked, fanning herself languorously.

He smiled quizzically into her face. "Rumor hath many tongues, fair lady, and most of them lying ones. The lady doesna' suit my taste; even her money couldna' tempt me, an' I need the money badly. That will take her conceit down a peg I'll warrant," he thought grimly.

"But she is very beautiful, I hear," said Mary, filled with delight at his answer.

"That I grant ye. Mistress Nancy is most



adept in the use of the hare's foot an' of the paint box. I'll wager she can teach even our incomparable actress, Mrs. Siddons, a few tricks in the art of makeup. Oh, but ye should see the lady in the early morning. 'Fore heaven, she resembles damaged goods!" Now would come the explosion of wounded pride and outraged dignity, he thought calmly, but his amazement was unbounded when the seeming Lady Nancy jumped up and down, ecstatically clapping her hands in a very undignified manner. "Ye seem o'er pleased at my remark," he exclaimed with a puzzled frown.

"I am, I am pleased!" she cried joyfully.

"What?" he stammered taken aback—"why, I—I thought ye were——" He stopped, flushed and embarrassed.

"Were Lady Nancy Gordon!" she finished. "O Lud, if I were, I wouldn't feel complimented at all the flattering things I've heard!" and she went off in a peal of merry laughter.

"Who are ye then, who comes to my chamber at night?" he asked curtly, chagrined at his mistake. She shook her head and laughed softly.

"Ye shall know in good time," she replied coquettishly. "I—I must make certain that ye dinna' love—me." She smiled, but her heart was beating wildly.

"I love only one maiden, an' I make her my wife within a week," he answered with dignity.

"An' ye've no regrets for Lady Nancy, nor for



Mrs. McLehose, nor—nor any o' the grand ladies ye'll be givin' up to marry the little country maiden?" she asked softly, forgetting in her eagerness her lapse into her natural speech.

"None, my lady," he replied firmly. Noo, lets call a truce to this masquerade! I am at a loss to understand your errand here to-night, but do not press ye for an explanation, and as I am due at the Duke of Athol's, I must bid ye good-night." He bowed coldly, and started to leave her.

But with a cry of joy, which thrilled him to the heart, she drew near to him with outstretched arms. "Robbie, lad, canna' ye guess who I am?" she cried. "I'm nae a grand lady at all, I'm only your Highland Mary." With a quick movement, she tore off the mask from her flushed and radiant face and threw it far from her.

"Mary, is it ye?" he gasped, almost speechless with surprise. He could scarcely believe his senses. This radiantly beautiful lady his Highland Mary? was such a metamorphosis possible?

She made him a little courtesy. "Aye, 'tis Mary!" she answered, her heart beating fast with pleasure. Quickly she told him how she had come, why she had come, and how long she had waited, just to hear his words of approval. "Do I please ye, laddie?" she asked shyly.

For a moment he could not speak. Her wonderful perfection of beauty startled him. He drew her



closely into his arms, kissing her with almost pathetic tenderness. "Mary, my love, my sweet lass!" and his voice trembled. "Pleased! Good Heavens, what little words those are to express my feelings. I can tell ye how you look, for nothing can ever make ye vain! Ye're the most beautiful lassie I've ever seen! Ah, but I'm proud of ye this night. Ye're fit to wear a coronet, Mary lass! I ken there will not be a grand lady at the ball to-night who will look half sae bonnie, nor hae such sweet, dainty manners, as my country sweetheart." He held her off at arm's length and glanced with affectionate adoration, from the fair, golden-crowned head down to the point of the small pearl-embroidered slipper that peeped beneath the edge of the rich, sheeny white robe.

"It seems so strange to be here in Edinburgh, decked out in all this finery," she murmured dreamily, "and on my way to a real ball. Is it really me?"

"Aye, 'tis ye, Mary, I'll swear to that!" he cried heartily, kissing the sweet, ingenuous face raised to his so wistfully. She blushed with pleasure, and bashfully turned her head away. "Ye dinna' think I look awkward, do ye laddie?" she inquired in a low, timid voice.

"Nay, ye're grace itself, sweetheart!" he replied reassuringly, raising her chin till her drooping eyes met his.

"An' ye wouldna ken I was only a dairymaid



if it werena for my speech, would ye?" she interrogated, with pathetic hopefulness. Her concerned, anxious little face and wistful manner touched him deeply.

"I wouldna have ye changed for all the world, Mary!" he told her tenderly, pressing his lips to the one little curl which hung unconfined over her snowy shoulder. "Be your own pure, sweet self always, for ye're the fairest of all God's creatures to me noo."

She gave a deep sigh of absolute content, and leaned against him silently for a moment. Then she looked up at him brightly. "This fine dress makes me quite a grand lady, doesna' it?" she prattled innocently.

"Aye! every inch a queen!" and he made her a deep bow.

"But it isna mine, Robbie," she whispered confidentially. "I borrowed it for the night only, like Cinderella in the fairy book, to make my début into fashionable society," and she laughed gleefully, like a little child telling a wonderful secret. "It's Mrs. Dunlop's wedding gown, Robbie; isna it just sweet?" She passed her hand gently over the folds of the silk and there was awe and reverence in the touch. "Oh, how I love to smooth it, 'tis so soft an' rich an' glossy; it isna' wrong to love the beautiful things, is it, laddie?" she asked earnestly.

"Nay," replied Robert, smiling tenderly at her



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naïveté. "Love the pretty things all ye like, dearie, for hereafter ye shall have the finest gowns in town. Ye shall select whatsoever your fancy pleases—dresses, bonnets, mits, boots," and he enumerated on his fingers all the articles he could remember so dear to a woman's heart.

"Shall I really, really?" she gasped as he finished, looking at him with wondering eyes. "I hae never bought a pretty thing in a' my life, ye ken, an' oh, won't it be just sweet? We'll go to the shops to-morrow, an' Mrs. Dunlop will help me select my—my wedding gown." She held her head away bashfully, blushing pink before the sudden fire that gleamed in the dark eyes bent on her so devotedly.

"Your wedding gown?" he repeated, with dreamy softness. "Let it be silk, Mary, white, soft and shimmering, to float around ye like a cloud of sunshine. An' ye must have a bridal veil too, lassie, one sae fine an' transparent that it will cover ye o'er like the morning mist."

"I would be afraid to buy so much," she replied gravely. "'Twould be too costly, an' ye canna' afford to waste sae much money to deck me out like a lady," and she shook her head in firm disapproval.

He laughed heartily at her sober face and air of housewifely prudence. "My dear," he whimsically told her, "dinna' ye mind the cost. A weddin' doesna' often happen in one's lifetime, sae we'll make it a grand one this time."



"Ye'll spoil me, Robbie," she answered, smiling happily.

"Nay, ye're too sweet and lovely to be spoiled."

"Well, ye ken," she replied demurely, "sweet things spoil the quickest."

Before he could reply, the rattle of a carriage over the pavement sounded loudly through the room. As it stopped at the door, Mary gave a little sigh of regret. "It's Mrs. Dunlop, returning for me at last," she said. She secretly hoped the sharp old eyes would not miss the cloak.

"Aye, like the good fairy godmother," smiled Robert, as he led her out of the room and down the stairs.

"I feel as if I were in a dream," she murmured softly, picking up her train, and lovingly holding it over her arm, as she walked daintily across the sidewalk to the waiting carriage. "If I am, laddie," she continued earnestly, "I hope I may never awake from it; I want to dream on forever."



## CHAPTER XV

WHEN Lady Glencairn, after her arrival at the Duke of Athol's, found that Robert had not come—indeed she and Lord Glencairn and Sir William Creech, her uncle, had been the first to arrive—she decided recklessly to visit him at his chambers, so she had easily stolen away unnoticed by all save one, on her indiscreet journey. Sir William had seen her as she slipped guiltily out through the conservatory window and had followed her with growing suspicions to the door of Robert's chamber, where he waited in impotent wrath for her to reappear, after having questioned the guidwife within the inn. And he was not deceived when she came out, wrapped in the disguising cloak and mask. He followed her like a grim servitor till she reached the castle, and as she was noiselessly reëntering by the conservatory window, he called to her to wait. With a startled gasp she turned, and as her eyes rested on her uncle's accusing face, she gave a little laugh, half scornful, half defiant, and leisurely throwing off her cloak and mask, stood waiting for him to speak.

“Ye foolish woman!” he told her angrily. “How could ye be so imprudent, reckless mad, as to visit a man's chamber at night?”

“Don't preach to me, uncle,” she answered sul-



lenly. "No one knows of my being there, not even Mr. Burns himself."

"But what were ye thinkin' of to do such a reprehensible act?" he demanded sternly. She turned on him suddenly.

"Because I love him!" she exclaimed passionately, casting prudence to the winds. "I went there to tell him of my love, to give myself to him, to beg him to take me away from here, to take me anywhere, only to let me be near him, to stay with him. But I was forced to come away without seeing him, thanks to you."

For a moment he regarded the reckless woman in silence, amazement, shame, and anger struggling for the mastery.

"Alice, of what are you thinking?" he ejaculated finally, catching her roughly by the arm. "You must control yourself. I speak for your own good. Think no more of this idle poet, for only shame, ruin and unhappiness can come to ye and your husband, unless ye give up this unholy passion."

She laughed scornfully. "My husband!" she cried bitterly. "Don't remind me of that fossil! You, and the rest of my family, are to blame for my being fettered, tied to a man I do not love. If it were not for that, I could find the happiness I crave."

"Sh! be calm!" he continued, looking anxiously around. "You may be overheard. Foolish woman!"



do you forget that Robert Burns, as well as yourself, is married."

"He is not!" she flashed impetuously. "That was no legal tie. Some foolish chit of a country lass flung herself at him, with the usual result. Any man would have done as he did, but unlike most men, he, out of pity and from a high sense of honor, married her; but it was an irregular marriage, which was speedily annulled by the girl's father. He is free now, free as ever he was. The girl has given him up, poor fool. I only am the shackled one, a prisoner for life, unless——" An eager light flashed in her deepened eyes.

"Unless Robert Burns elopes with ye!" he finished sarcastically. "I warn ye, Alice, not to play with edged tools; 'tis o'er dangerous. Be more careful or others will suspect what I already know." She smiled disdainfully and shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"Do not force me to open your husband's eyes!" he retorted, angered by her irritating indifference. She looked at him, her heart filled with sudden fury. How she would like to hit him in the face with her fan, how she hated him and his interference, his unwelcome advice. "Already," he continued irritably, "you have given that scandalmonger, Eppy McKay, cause to suspect your too warm and ardent affection for Mr. Burns, by openly showing jealousy of Lady Nancy Gordon."



“I jealous of Nancy Gordon?” she repeated, with airy scorn, walking toward the door of the conservatory. “Huh, not I, uncle; I am not so unconscious of my own charms,” and she drew her magnificent figure up to its full height, then smiled insolently into his perturbed and nervous face. “I thank you for all your advice,” she murmured sweetly as they traversed the long hall, “but remember, hereafter, that I mean to steer my own canoe, whether it leads me into safe waters or through the rapids.” And with a radiant smile upon her sensuous lips she entered the drawing-room, leaning affectionately upon the arm of her outraged but speechless relative. Quietly she took her place by her waiting husband’s side, her dark eyes full of a bewitching and dangerous softness, for her thoughts were on the one guest whose very name had the power to move her so completely.

Never had she appeared so dazzlingly beautiful, as she stood there meeting her friends and acquaintances with a deep ceremonious courtesy for the distinguished ones, a smile and a nod for her intimates, and an air of high-bred insolence and extreme self-satisfaction prevailing over her whole appearance.

No one was ever bored at the Duchess of Athol’s brilliant “at homes.” One always felt sure of meeting at least three or four justly celebrated personages under her hospitable roof. And to-night society was a-gog, for it was to welcome the farmer-



poet, Robert Burns, who had returned from his triumphant tour through the Highlands. Soon the capacious drawing-rooms were crowded. There was the rustle of silk and satin, rare and delicate perfumes shaken out of lace kerchiefs, while the heavy scent of the many bouquets oppressed the warm air to the point of suffocation. There was an interminably monotonous murmur of voices, only broken at rare intervals by a ripple of mild laughter. Over by the large windows that overlooked the terrace stood a group of people gazing earnestly out beyond the gardens at some object, which had arrested their attention, with various degrees of interest.

“Whatever is happening below on Princes Street?” suddenly inquired one of the ladies, nervously clutching the arm of the man nearest her. Eppy McKay was an eccentric maiden lady of questionable age and taste. Of more than ordinary height naturally, she looked a giantess in her powdered wig, which towered fully a foot in the air, and which was decorated profusely with waving plumes, rosettes and jewels. Her lowcut gown of crimson satin, over a petticoat of quilted green silk, was cut extremely low, revealing a vision of skin and bones, powdered to a ghastly whiteness. Her affectations, her simperings, and her poses accorded society much amusement, of which fact she was blissfully unconscious.

“There is a crowd gathered around a carriage,



but farther than that I cannot make out," replied Mr. Mackenzie, the famous author and publisher.

A prolonged shout from below increased the restlessness of the timid Eppy. "Oh, dear!" she gasped. "If it should be an uprising of the Jacobites," and she looked fearfully into the amused faces of her companions.

With a disgusted grunt, Sir William Creech shook his arm free from her clawlike clutch. "Nonsense, woman, ye're daft!" he answered impatiently.

"Well, upon my word!" she murmured in injured surprise.

"The mob is increasing—'tis coming nearer!" exclaimed Mr. Mackenzie, stepping out upon the wide balcony.

"So it is," affirmed Eppy, retreating behind the heavy curtains. "Lady Glencairn!" she called as her ladyship approached the window. "Listen to those murmurs! Oh, dear! it makes me so nervous."

Lady Glencairn stepped out upon the balcony, followed by the timid Eppy, and stood contemplating the scene in the brightly lighted street below them.

"It sounds not ominous," she said quietly, after a moment. "Lud, what a throng! They have unhitched the horses from a carriage, and are themselves drawing it hither."

"Who is in the carriage, can you see?" eagerly asked Eppy, straining her eyes.



"A gentleman, who is evidently addressing the people," answered Lady Glencairn slowly. She gazed intently at the figure silhouetted against the light of the street lamps. Surely she knew that form. At that moment he turned, and with a flush of surprise, a thrill of joy, she suddenly recognized him.

"Upon my life, 'tis Robert, Robert Burns!" she cried excitedly.

"Aye, I recognize him now," said Mr. Mackenzie.

"And you say they are drawing him hither?" inquired Sir William incredulously, turning to his niece.

"Aye, and why not?" she replied brightly, turning to the others. "They should carry him on their shoulders, for he deserves all homage."

"And 'tis said the Scots are not demonstrative," ejaculated Mr. Mackenzie, as another burst of applause and cheers, followed by laughter, reached their ears.

"You hear how demonstrative they can be when occasion demands enthusiasm," replied Lady Glencairn stanchly, "when genius knocks at the door of their hearts. See how Edinburgh has utterly lost control of its conservative old self, and all over the poetic genius of Robert Burns."

"True, he has indeed stirred the hardest-hearted Scot by his fascinating poetry," mused Mr. Mackenzie admiringly.



"How I shall love him," sighed Eppy dreamily. "In sooth I do now," and she simpered and dropped her eyes like a love-sick school girl.

"And she has never met the man yet!" cried Sir William in amazement. "The woman's daft," he muttered, turning away.

"I do wish he would come," sighed Eppy. "I want to tell him how much I admire him and his poetry. Oh, I have the dearest little speech, that Sibella, my sister, composed, all prepared to say when I am presented to him." She rolled her eyes up ecstatically.

"I shall also recite one of his odes to him," she continued, in the tone of one who is about to confer a great favor. "I know 'twill please him greatly," and she fanned herself languidly.

"What have you selected?" inquired Lady Glencairn, laughing openly. The woman's vanity amused her.

"Such a sweet conceit," simpered Eppy.

"Is it 'Tam O'Shanter's Tale'?" inquired Mr. Mackenzie, interestedly.

"No, oh, no!" she replied, shaking her head. "'Tis monstrous long to recite."

"An ode to a calf," said Sir William grimly, "would be more appropriate."

"Perhaps 'tis the tale of 'The Twa Dogs,'" hazarded Lady Glencairn. Eppy laughed gleefully and shook her head.



"Tell us the name, madam; we're no children!" roared Sir William, glaring at her like an angry bull.

"You're so gruff," pouted Eppy reproachfully. "Do you all give it up?" They nodded. "Well, then, don't be shocked," and she shook her finger at them coquettishly; then leaning forward she whispered loudly, "'Tis entitled 'To a Louse.'"

"Heaven, preserve us!" ejaculated Mr. Mackenzie, laughing heartily.

"She's touched here!" cried Sir William commiseratingly, putting his finger to his head.

"Why did you choose that?" gasped Lady Glencairn, in amazement.

"Because 'tis a beautiful conceit," answered Eppy soulfully. "I protest, I mean to recite it."

"I vow 'tis a most singular selection."

"I don't see why," snapped Eppy spitefully. "'Twas written round a fact."

"Really, I hadn't heard of that," answered her ladyship, coolly turning away.

"I wonder at that," cooed Eppy innocently, although a little malicious twinkle appeared in her eyes. "You of all people should know everything pertaining to Mr. Burns and his verses." Lady Glencairn stiffened suddenly, and cast a quick look at the stern face of her uncle.

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Sir William aggressively, turning to Eppy.



“Oh, nothing, nothing!” she hastily replied, frightened by what she had said.

“Everything concerning Mr. Burns, my husband’s protégé, and my friend, my dear friend, I may call him, does interest me mightily, Miss McKay. Pray tell me the story connected with the poem, if you care to!” and Lady Glencairn turned her glittering eyes, which were narrowed dangerously, upon the face of the crestfallen Eppy.

Sir William gave a snort of anger. “Ye couldn’t stop her; she is dying to tell all she knows!” he said crustily.

Eppy cleared her throat vigorously. “Well, it was this way,” she began confidentially. “Mr. Burns was sitting behind a lady in Kirk, one Sabbath, who had on a new bonnet, of which she seemed most proud. As he was admiring its beauty, his keen eyes detected this horrid little animal crawling over the gauze and lace.”

“How fascinating,” murmured Mr. Mackenzie in mocking rapture.

“And it immediately inspired his pen to write the verses which have made such a sensation in town,” concluded Eppy, looking eagerly at her listeners for some look or word of approval.

“What a—a creepy story,” said Lady Glencairn, with a little shiver of repulsion.

She turned to her quickly. “’Tis said, my dear, and I ask you not to repeat it, for I promised not to



tell, that the lady in question was Agnes McLehose, the beautiful grass widow, who is such an ardent admirer of Mr. Burns, you know."

"Really!" murmured Lady Glencairn coldly.

"And the airs she put on!" cried Eppy, with lofty indignation. "Why, do you know——"

But Lady Glencairn interrupted her sharply. "I do not care to speak of Angas McLehose," she retorted frigidly, "and I never indulge in scandal, especially before my friends, so let us not disgust them with any woman's gossip."

"You are quite right," affirmed Eppy affably. "I do not believe in it myself; it always comes back to one."

"Who can understand a woman?" grunted Sir William aloud.

"Well, it's most easy to understand men," retorted Eppy quickly.

With a sigh of impatience, Lady Glencairn took Mr. Mackenzie's arm and silently they reëntered the drawing-room. They wended their way through the groups of people standing about, for the largest and most brilliant portion of the assemblage were standing, the sofas, ottomans, and chairs being occupied by the puffy old dowagers, who were entertaining each other with choice bits of scandal; and, finally, came to a standstill beside the grand piano. For a moment they remained quiet, listening to the glorious voice of Madame Urbani, who from the great



drawing-room above was trilling forth an aria from grand opera. From her position Lady Glencairn commanded a good view of the large arch through which the guests entered the drawing-rooms. Anxiously she watched for the handsome face and curly black hair of the poet above the crowd that surrounded her. "Why does he not come? what can be detaining him?" she asked herself for the hundredth time. Perhaps he was with Lady Nancy Gordon, she thought jealously, looking about the vast room. She was sure she had not yet been announced. It looked very suspicious that neither she, nor Robert, had arrived. And her heart was consumed with bitter jealousy, although her smiling face bore no traces of the raging fire within. How she hated that doll-faced beauty for being single and free! How she would delight in trampling her in the dust, she thought cruelly. Nearly a month had elapsed since Robert left Edinburgh, since she had seen him. A month filled with vain longing and unrest. And since his return, she could scarcely restrain her intense longing to see him. Day after day she would drive slowly past his lodgings, hoping to catch a glimpse of his glowing, dark face, which had such power to thrill her to the very depths of her intense and passionate nature. That longing had taken possession of her to-night, when she had slipped out and stolen away to his rooms, and she would have willingly given her body and soul to him, for the ask-



ing; but her good angel had protected her from her own indiscretion, and saved her unsuspecting victim from a great remorse. The gurgling voice of Eppy McKay broke in abruptly on her disturbing reverie.

"Oh, dear, I wish Mr. Burns would come," she said plaintively.

"He is usually very punctual," answered Lady Glencairn, opening her large fan of ostrich plumes and fanning herself indolently.

"Genius is never governed by any rules of punctuality or propriety," observed Mr. Mackenzie.

"Then he is exempt," replied her ladyship, smiling brightly. "Ah! you truant. Where have you been?" she demanded of her husband, who joined them at that moment.

"Incidentally getting a breath of fresh air, my dear," replied Lord Glencairn, smiling lovingly into his wife's face. "But in reality, I was listening to the ovation which Robert was receiving as he drove through Princes Street." Her eyes suddenly brightened.

"How I wish I could have heard his speech to the masses," she cried enthusiastically. "For I must confess, James, that no man's conversation ever carried me off my feet so completely as that of Robert Burns."

"Indeed, my lady!" he retorted in mock alarm. "Then it behooves me to keep my eye on you hereafter."



She joined in the laugh that followed, then remarked audaciously, "But, I vow, a little flirtation is really most exhilarating now and then." She flashed her brilliant eyes mockingly upon the horror-struck countenance of Eppy McKay.

"How indiscreet!" exclaimed Eppy in amazement, "and you are a married woman, too."

"'Tis perfectly shocking, isn't it?" mimicked her ladyship insolently.

Eppy pursed her thin lips, while a little spot of color dyed her parchment-like cheeks. "Well, I do not approve of married women flirting," she replied primly, and as she caught the look of amusement which passed between her ladyship and Mr. Mackenzie, she added sourly, "Especially in public."

"Oh! Then you do approve of it in private," replied her ladyship sweetly, innocently opening her eyes to their widest.

Eppy gave a gasp of horror. "Mercy, no!" she cried indignantly, "I should say not." And she tossed her head in virtuous anger.

"Robert Burns!" announced the footman at this juncture.

There was a sudden hush, a movement of excitement, and the group around the door fell back, and everybody made way for the most important guest of the evening, who for the last hour had been the all-absorbing topic of conversation. Lady Glencairn started violently, as she heard the name announced.



For a brief instant she closed her eyes, feeling faint, and trembling in an ecstasy of joy. He was here at last! Her heart throbbed so violently it stifled her.

“How noble he looks!” exclaimed Eppy in an awestruck tone, as she watched the tall figure in a polite but determined manner coolly elbowing a passage among the heaving bare shoulders, fat arms, the long trains, and bulging bustles and paniers that seriously obstructed his way. “And to think that man is but a lowly-bred peasant,” observed Mr. Mackenzie, as he watched him bending low over the hand of their hostess.

“A man’s a man, for all that!” murmured her ladyship, worshipful pride in her voice and in her dazzling eyes, as she watched him approach, bowing right and left. She drew herself up with the conscious air of a beauty who knows she is nearly perfect, and with a smile she extended her jeweled hand. “I’m so glad to see you here to-night,” she says sweetly, although a glance like fire seen through smoke leaps from beneath her silky eyelashes, but Robert saw it not; he was bending low over her fair hand. “Welcome back to Edinburgh!” she continued, pressing his hand warmly.

A bright smile lighted up his dark visage. “Thank ye,” he returned simply. Then he turned to Lord Glencairn with outstretched hand. “My lord!” he said warmly, “how glad, how delighted,



I am to again press the hand of my patron, my friend."

"The pleasure is mutual, my lad!" he replied. A kindly smile lighted up his noble face, as he perceived the ruddy glow of health in the full cheeks, the flashing eyes of the young poet. "Ah, you return to us looking bonnier than ever," he continued. "Your triumphant tour through the north with its Highland chieftains and lords at your feet, has not turned your head after all."

Robert laughed good-naturedly. "Not a bit of it," he replied frankly.

"Let me present Mr. Henry Mackenzie," introduced Lady Glencairn at this juncture.

Robert advanced eagerly to meet him, his hand extended, his eyes flashing with delight. "The author of the 'Man of Feeling,' the first book I loved and admired years ago!" he exclaimed in direct frankness. "It is an unexpected pleasure, sir."

"The pleasure is mutual," replied Mr. Mackenzie, flushing at the compliment. "We witnessed your triumphant progress up Princes Street, and were delighted at the ovation you received."

Robert laughed happily. "Was it not wonderful?" he answered in his sonorous voice, which had such a thrilling richness in it. "I could scarcely realize it was the once poor, humble Robbie Burns they were cheering. I am indeed happy; my popularity has not begun to wane yet." He re-



garded the great publisher with kindling eyes. "That I am so favorably known, is due to your kindly articles in your inestimable paper, *The Lounger*, and your unbiased criticism of my poems, which brought me before the public, and I thank you most heartily for that generous criticism which was so judicious withal." A little murmur of approval from his listeners greeted his last words.

"'Twas a pleasure, believe me, Mr. Burns," he answered quietly, "to lend a helping hand to assist a struggling genius."

"Thank ye," said Robert, simply.

"I believe you have never met our esteemed contemporary, Mr. Sterne, author of 'Tristram Shandy,'" observed Mr. Mackenzie, and he quickly made the introduction.

Robert turned quickly to the grave and dignified scholar. "Little did I ever dream," he said fervently, "that I would one day meet and converse with my two favorite authors."

A smile of gratified vanity overspread the rugged features of the scholar. "I am proud indeed," he observed pompously, "if my book has found favor in your eyes, Mr. Burns." And soon they had become engaged in an animated conversation, much to the chagrin of one of his admirers, who had been waiting patiently to be introduced. She had been mentally rehearsing her little speech for some time, and was now waiting for the opportunity to deliver it.



"No one would ever take him for a farmer," she thought in open-mouthed, worshipful adoration.

"He looks quite like a gentleman," said a haughty voice near her, in a tone of great surprise.

"Huh! he makes love to every woman he meets!" replied Sir William spitefully.

With a thrill of rapture at the thought, Eppy attracted the attention of Lady Glencairn, and whispered in that lady's impatient ear, "Introduce me, please; I see Mr. Burns is regarding me very closely."

Presently a lull occurred in the discussion, and Lady Glencairn smilingly introduced the garrulous old lady to the poet, as a "warm admirer of his poems." "And of you, too," eagerly interrupted Eppy, clasping his hand in both of her own. "Oh! I have longed for this moment, that I might clasp the hand of Scotia's Bard, and tell him how I love him,"—she broke off with a smothered giggle. "I mean his poems; oh, they are too heavenly for utterance," and she rolled her little gray eyes till only the whites showed. "Sibella—she's my sister, and a dear creature if I do say so—and I have had many a lovely cry over them," she rattled on hardly pausing for breath. "Ah, they have made us so happy. You must come and see her, won't you, she's a writer also, and you can have a sweet talk over your art. We belong to a literary family, you know. Rob Don, the Gaelic poet, belonged to our clan. We take



after him." She smiled affectedly and batted her little eyes in what she fondly believed a very fetching manner.

Robert had vainly tried to edge in a word, and now stood listening to the silly prattle, a smile of amusement playing round his mobile mouth.

"A long way after," observed Sir William dryly. Then he threw up his hands in dismay, for Eppy had started off again.

"Here I am rattling off a lot of nonsense," she gurgled, "but I do enjoy your talking so much, Mr. Burns. I vow I could listen to it all day. I shall always remember this happy occasion of our meeting." She stopped, out of breath, panting but happy.

Robert regarded her quizzically for a moment while an audible titter was heard throughout the rooms. "You quite overwhelm me, Miss McKay," he drawled at last. "But I have nevertheless enjoyed conversing with you. Really, madam, I felt quite eloquent and did myself full justice," and he bowed gravely.

"Oh, you flatterer!" tittered Eppy, slapping his arm coquettishly with her fan. "But I am not madam yet." She ventured a quick look at Sir William.

"Robert, I have been requested to ask you to recite one of your favorite poems; will you honor us?" asked Lord Glencairn, coming forward.



At once there was a chorus of inanely polite voices. "Oh, do recite, Mr. Burns!" "Please give us 'Tam O'Shanter's Ride,' " etc., etc.

Robert slowly looked around him at the sea of faces, and suddenly a feeling of resentment filled his heart. Must he parade himself before these empty-headed noodles, who regarded him in the light of a curiosity, a plaything, to amuse them by his antics? Why didn't they ask Mr. Mackenzie or Mr. Sterne or Dr. Blacklock, Mr. Ramsay, or any one of the others to read from their books?

"I must ask ye to excuse me to-night," he replied coldly. "I have been speaking in the open air and my voice is tired."

"Then I will recite in your stead," cried Eppy, determined to make an impression on the romantic young farmer.

They crowded around her, laughing and joking, for poor Eppy was the innocent, unsuspecting butt of society.

"What is your selection?" someone asked seriously.

"'Tis about the cunning little animal Mr. Burns saw on the lady's bonnet," replied Eppy. "The lady's name was—er——" She paused and looked inquiringly into Robert's grimly amused face.

"Ye would be very much surprised, perhaps shocked and grieved, Miss McKay," he answered, "were I to mention the lady's name here, so I'll spare



your feelings. Please recite the poem." Eppy made a deep courtesy, blissfully unconscious that the lady in question was none else than herself. And after arranging her dress to her satisfaction, cleared her throat affectedly and made several ineffectual attempts to begin the recitation. Gradually a look of comical despair puckered up her face, and turning to Robert with an embarrassed giggle, she exclaimed poutingly, "I cannot recall a single line. How provoking, and I protest. I knew every line by rote this morning. Please start me on the first verse, Mr. Burns."

The spectacle of this silly old woman making a fool of herself before that heartless crowd both annoyed and embarrassed Robert. "The last verse is my favorite," he replied, frowning angrily at the amused titters which reached his ears from all sides, and quickly he read the verse through:

"Oh wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see ourselves as others see us.  
It wad fra many a blunder free us, and foolish notion  
What airs in dress and gait wad leave us, and e'en devotion."

And none knew whether the shaft was pointed at them or at the object of their mirth, who stood before him with clasped hands and a smile meant to be winning on her weak face, listening with all her senses.

"How true that is," murmured Lady Glencairn.

"Yes, indeed," sighed Eppy soulfully. "What



fools some people make of themselves, and they never know it, which is the funny part of it." She darted a quick glance at Lady Glencairn, who returned the look calmly and evenly, although she was saying to herself, "Is she the fool she appears, or is she giving me a dig, I wonder?"

She turned to Robert. "Mr. Burns, will you find me a chair, please; I am rather fatigued, standing so long."

He offered her his arm. "It will be rather a difficult matter," he observed, looking about him vainly. "Still, I can try." And he moved through the swaying crowd and out upon the balcony, with her little gloved hand resting lightly on his coat sleeve.

"I saw you this morning, Mr. Burns, on Calton Hill," she observed lightly, "but at a distance. Upon driving nearer I lost sight of you; you must have vanished into the air."

"Not at all," replied Robert, sitting beside her on the low balustrade. "I found a beautiful solitude amongst a luxuriant growth of willows, which no doubt you overlooked."

"To be sure," she returned. "Now I remember. A sad scene occurred there a few years ago; a lady from Loch Carron drowned herself in the little pond they hang over, because the man she loved despised her." Her voice was soft and low. She drooped her eyes and sighed.



"Poor unhappy woman," sighed Robert sympathetically.

She looked at him quickly, her face flushing, her eyes earnestly searching his face. "Then you would have pitied her?" she asked almost breathlessly.

"He cannot be a man who would not pity a woman under such circumstances," he replied simply and thoughtfully.

"She loved him devotedly, recklessly," she continued, her voice trembling with suppressed emotion; "but she had no moral right to do so," she continued. "She was a wife, a miserable, unhappy wife; she deserved much pity, but he was pitiless and uncharitable. He despised her weakness, and so—she drowned herself." Her voice sank into a strained, unnatural whisper.

"Poor unhappy woman!" he repeated compassionately. "She was over-hasty, I fear."

"You would not have consigned her to such a fate, would you?" she faltered, laying her soft feverish hand on his.

He started violently and was silent for a time. Then, slowly, sorrowfully he turned and looked into her tell-tale face; for a moment she gazed at him, her eyes glittering with an unholy light, her bosom heaving tumultuously. Then she slowly drooped her head.

"'Twould be a heavy load to have on one's conscience," he replied constrainedly.



He rose from his seat and stood looking thoughtfully across to where Endinburgh castle loomed up on the hill, so cold and gloomy, outlined against the blue sky.

She glided swiftly to his side. "Robert, let me——" she began passionately, when the cold voice of Sir William Creech rooted her to the spot in terror. Out of the shadow walked her uncle, and ignoring her presence he addressed himself to Robert.

"Well, Mr. Burns!" he said angrily, "perhaps ye'll condescend to notice me now, your publisher, Sir William Creech."

"I hope ye're well," returned Robert indifferently.

Sir William quivered with rage. "Ye've been in town a week, and yet ye have not called to notify me of your arrival," he sputtered.

"I quite forgot, Sir William," answered Rob repentently; "you see I'm not a good business man. However, to-morrow I will call and we will arrange our much neglected business matters."

"And there is much to arrange. Why did ye refuse to write for my weekly? I offered to pay ye well for it," he snarled.

"Pay!" flashed Rob indignantly. "Do you think to buy the fruit of my brain like so much merchandise, at so much a line for a penny newspaper? I am not a penny journalist, I am a poet. Whenever I embark on any undertaking it is with honest enthusiasm, and to talk of money, wage, or fee would



be a downright prostitution of the soul," and his eyes flashed dangerously.

"You do not despise money, Robert Burns?" retorted Sir William sarcastically.

"Most certainly not!" replied Robert quickly. "'Tis a most necessary commodity, but extremely elusive, and to show you that money has no terrors for me, I shall expect a settlement to-morrow in full. Some £300 are due me from the sale of the last edition of my songs." He returned Sir William's wrathful gaze, his eyes full of righteous anger and strong determination.

"Just one word more, Mr. Burns!" he began belligerently, but Robert raised his hand with a stately gesture.

"I'm in a sorry mood for business, Sir William Creech," he warned him, a steely glitter in his eye.

"Well, ye will hear what I've to say," insisted Sir William doggedly. "Ye are under contract to me, sir; but instead of living up to the terms of that agreement, ye are scattering broadcast to every person that pleases your fancy, a song or an ode or a poem, which diminishes the worth and consequent sale of your collection."

"Lud, uncle," interposed Lady Glencairn quickly, "I'll warrant it makes not the slightest difference."

"'Tis not fair to me," sputtered Sir William, "and I warn ye, Mr. Burns, ye must not do it again. I strictly forbid it."



"Uncle!" gasped Lady Glencairn in amazement.

"Ye forbid?" repeated Robert in immeasurable scorn. "Ye nor any man living can dictate to Robert Burns. I shall write when an' for whom I please. I will not barter an' sell my soul like so much merchandise. You published my collection of songs an' have made money out o' the transaction, which is mair than I have done. I am sick of it all; I am done with your roguery, your deceit, now an' forever." And he waved his hand in angry dismissal.

"But our contract," gasped Sir William, taken aback.

"'Tis ended now, canceled by your ain insult, an' I shall take means to collect my just dues."

"Are you not hasty?" asked Lady Glencairn concernedly.

"I told ye to call to-morrow," snarled Sir William, "and I'll pay ye, then ye can gang your own gait. I have sought to give you advice, but ye were too haughty and independent, and ye wouldn't listen, but ye will yet see and realize the bitter truth of my words, so go on in your career of folly and its inevitable ruin, for ye'll soon be at the end of your tether, and may the devil claim ye for his own." He stalked angrily away, muttering to himself, "Ye upstart, ye low-born peasant, I'll humble ye yet!"

Robert turned to Lady Glencairn with a smile of apology on his lips. "I ask your pardon, Lady Glencairn," he said humbly, "for being the cause of



this unseemly scene in your presence, but my anger was aroused, an' I simply couldna' help speaking my thoughts—I am always doing the wrong thing."

"Oh, nonsense!" she responded laughingly. "Let us forget it and join the others." She took his arm and they slowly entered the ballroom, where they were speedily joined by Lord Glencairn and a party of friends, who immediately surrounded them.

"My dear," said Lord Glencairn, "do you know that you have left us an unconscionable time? Is there some witchery about yon balcony that I know not of?" and he smiled affectionately upon his wife, whose eyes were shining with happiness.

"Your pardon, James, but I'm sure our absence was not noted in such a distinguished assemblage." She glanced carelessly about the room at the groups of sedate-looking people gravely conversing with each other while they strolled slowly, aimlessly about with much dignity and ceremony, and an almost imperceptible sneer curled her full lips. "Oh, the stiff formality of some of these Calvinistic old fossils!" she remarked contemptuously to Robert.

"From all such people, good Lord deliver us," he replied in a low chant.

"Amen!" cried Eppy, looking archly at Sir William. "Give me youth and gayety always." Sir William looked his unspoken scorn.

"You and I may well sigh for youth, Miss McKay," quavered the venerable Dr. Blacklock. "Many



moons have passed since he eluded our clutch and fled, never to return," and he sighed dismally.

"Speak for yourself, Doctor," bridled Eppy. "I shall never let go my hold on youth," and she tossed her head indignantly.

"Speaking of fossils," said Lady Glencairn pointedly, turning to Eppy, "I wonder what can have happened to Mrs. Dunlop?"

"Oh, she is always late for effect," she replied spitefully.

"Mrs. Dunlop is a very dear friend of mine," observed Robert quietly, but his eyes flashed with indignation.

"I beg your pardon for my rudeness," murmured Lady Glencairn sweetly.

"I understand Mrs. Dunlop is chaperoning a new beauty," said Lord Glencairn inquiringly to his wife.

She gave him a side glance that was far from pleasant. New beauty, indeed! There was only one recognized beauty in Edinburgh and she would not yield the palm to anyone. "I really do not know to whom you allude, James," she said coldly.

The Duchess of Athol, who was standing near, smiled significantly. "Mrs. Dunlop asked permission to bring a young friend, who was visiting her from the Highlands," she remarked pleasantly. "I do not know her in the least, and they may not come at all."



"Mrs. Dunlop and Miss Campbell!" announced the footman loudly. With a smile on his handsome face and a hurried word of apology, Robert rapidly walked to meet the approaching couple, who were the cynosure of all eyes. Mrs. Dunlop was recognized by all as a woman of much importance in Edinburgh society. She knew everybody and everybody knew her, for she was the lineal descendant of the immortal Wallace, a fact of which she was justly proud. She was a motherly looking woman, with a charming smile and a pleasant, taking manner.

But the murmur of admiration throughout the room was not for her; it was for the slim little girl in white with the blue eyes and fair hair, which glittered like gold beneath the brilliant light of the chandeliers. "Who can she be?" they whispered to each other in wonder. "Evidently not a person of importance, else she would be dressed in the fashion of the day and have her hair powdered."

"At last, Mary, ye're here!" cried Robert delightedly, placing her hand within his arm. She clung to it with a nervous clutch.

"The child is frightened to death," whispered Mrs. Dunlop, smiling indulgently.

Lady Glencairn turned very pale, as she recognized the girl she had met in Robert's room. She trembled and could scarcely regain her usual composure as Robert with a proud tenderness lighting up the depths of his black eyes, led the vision of youth and





“ ‘Mrs. Dunlop and Miss Campbell,’ announced the footman loudly.”







perfect beauty up to the hostess, to whom he introduced Mary. Then he turned to Lady Glencairn. "Lady Glencairn, allow me to introduce to you Miss Campbell. You remember Highland Mary, do you not?"

She gave a slight start and her muscles tightened. The dairymaid sweetheart here in Edinburgh? she thought in amazement. What could it mean?

"Quite well," she answered, extending her cold jeweled hand. "I little dreamed I should ever meet you here like this, but the unexpected always happens."

"Dinna' ye mind, my lady," replied Mary simply, "ye said ye would be glad to see me whenever I came to town." She raised those marvelous, innocent eyes of hers and smiled. Why did Lady Glencairn shrink from that frank and childlike openness of regard? Why did she for one brief moment feel herself to be vile and beneath contempt? She turned to where Mrs. Dunlop was conversing animatedly with their hostess, a flush akin to shame mantling her haughty face.

"My dear Duchess," she was saying apologetically, "pray pardon our late arrival, but I assure you 'tis not made for effect; our carriage broke down on the way."

Eppy started in amazement; had she overheard her spiteful remark?

The Duchess graciously inclined her stately



head. "So glad you got here at all, Mrs. Dunlop," she said.

Robert turned laughingly to the group of eager people importuning him for an introduction to the beautiful débutante. "Time forbids my introducing ye individually to Miss Campbell," he said good-naturedly, "therefore let me present ye collectively to Highland Mary, my future wife, whom ye have all read of an' loved in my poems." A ripple of applause greeted the news, and congratulations poured in upon them, both hearty and sincere.

Lady Glencairn staggered slightly, her face paling, but she quickly recovered and stood haughtily erect, fanning herself a little more rapidly, her full red lips tightened to a thin malicious line.

Eppy rushed up to Mary effusively. "May I kiss you, dear?" she asked gushingly, "you are so sweet and pretty, just like I was a few years ago," and she kissed the blushing girl with a resounding smack. "You'll be married in Edinburgh, I presume?" she continued volubly. "I must attend the wedding."

"The marriage will be most private, madam," observed Robert coldly.

"Do you stay long in Edinburgh, Miss Campbell?" asked Lady Glencairn abruptly, forcing a smile to her lips.

"No, not long, your ladyship," replied Mary timidly. The cold metallic tones of the haughty



lady frightened her strangely. "I—I ne'er thought I'd e'er come to Edinburgh," she said, "but——" She hesitated and looked shyly at Robert, and then looked modestly down at the bit of cobweb lace which she held in her hand and which did duty as a 'kerchief.

"But I found the barrier between us was down, that I was free as ever to wed the sweetheart of my boyhood days," he explained with simple dignity.

"Aye, but you make a bonnie couple," exclaimed Mrs. Dunlop admiringly. "Well, I don't blame anyone for falling in love with you, Robert," she declared frankly. "You're a great man," and she nodded her head vigorously. "And a handsome one, too."

Robert blushed and shook his finger in warning at his old friend, although a tender smile played around his eyes and mouth. "Mrs. Dunlop, men are said to flatter women because they are weak," he said, "but if it is so, poets must be weaker still, for the artful compliments I have received from your sex have absolutely turned my head, an' really I begin to look on myself as a person of no small importance," and he rougishly winked his eye at his old friend.

"I never knew a man yet who was averse to flattery," retorted the old lady good-naturedly.

In the brief lull that followed the general laugh, the voice of Lord Glencairn could be heard in conversation with Mary, who was earnestly gazing up



into his face, all traces of timidity gone, for she felt singularly at her ease in the presence of the kindly old nobleman. "And so you mean to take Robert away from us for good, eh?" he was saying in his earnest, serious manner.

"Ye ken he is fair anxious to get back to Moss-giel now," replied Mary, blushing deeply.

Lady Glencairn snapped her fan together convulsively. "You mean to leave Edinburgh for good?" she asked in faint, incredulous accents, turning to Robert.

The people crowded around and a storm of protest arose. "What madness!" "Leave Edinburgh for the country!" "They couldn't hear of such a thing." "He owed a duty to them as Scotland's Bard!" etc., etc.

Robert turned to them and spoke lightly, although with an undercurrent of seriousness. "I ken I am but wasting my time, my energies, my talents here, amid the sensual delight which your city affords," he said. "I am not formed for it. I am but a rustic at heart and in manners, and the country is my only vantageground."

Mary stole softly to his side and snuggled her hand in his. "Isn't it sweet to be in love?" cried Eppy cooingly, to Sir William, in a sibilant aside. "Think what we are missing."

"We're too old for such nonsense," replied Sir William gruffly.



"Oh, indeed!" flashed Eppy. "Huh, a woman's never too old to love," with an indignant toss of her head.

"No, nor to make a fool of herself," retorted Sir William, smiling grimly.

"But we cannot give you up just yet," declared Lord Glencairn emphatically, placing his hand affectionately on Robert's shoulder.

"I am sure, Mr. Burns," said Mr. Mackenzie gravely, "that your friends and admirers would not advise such a move for you, especially as you are now riding high on the top wave of success."

"I have nothing to gain by staying here, Mr. Mackenzie," replied Robert, turning to him and speaking slowly and thoughtfully, "for, as you observe, I am now firmly established as a poet. I fear I am not proof against the subtle temptations which constantly beset my path and which push aside all thoughts of poesy; so as discretion is the better part of valor," he continued, looking lovingly at the girl clinging so confidently to his arm, "I shall flee from it all to my farm, my plow, and there amid those innocent, wholesome surroundings pass my remaining days in peace wi' my wife by my side."

Mrs. Dunlop sighed dismally and shook her white curls in decided disapproval. "Laddie, you will be taking a false step," she declared emphatically; "your place is here before the public."

"Indeed it is!" gurgled Eppy soulfully. "I



protest Edinburgh cannot spare its poet yet. Your old farm can wait for you yet a while."

Mary looked at his thoughtful face with anxious eyes. She prayed fervently that nothing would dissuade him from his purpose. For it had been at her earnest solicitation that he finally decided to give up the enervating pleasures of the Capital, and to retire to the country where he would be free from the contaminating influences which now surrounded him.

He smiled reassuringly into her perturbed little face. No power on earth could tempt him to break the promise he had so willingly made her on that first day of her arrival in the gay metropolis, he thought fondly. He turned to his questioners, who were eagerly awaiting his answer, his face shining with fixed determination.

"My friends," he said quietly, "I am only a farmer born, a son of the soil. My one ambition now is to have my own roof-tree near the Doon, where amidst the beauties of harmonious nature the Goddess Muse will commune with me as of old, for 'twas there the greatest inspiration of my soul came to me, and I know if all else fails me an independent livelihood awaits me at the plowtail."

"Tut, tut, the plowtail, indeed!" sniffed Mrs. Dunlop indignantly.

Lady Glencairn, who had been feverishly toying with her fan, turned suddenly to Mary, a sneering



smile on her crimson lips, "And have you no higher ambition for your future husband, Miss Campbell?" she demanded, her voice strangely harsh and metallic. "Are you content to have him bury his talents in the country?"

"Yes! Oh, yes!" answered Mary shyly, a happy smile dimpling her sweet face. Then she added naïvely, "Ye ken, I'll hae him all to myself then." Robert laughed merrily at this naïve confession.

"Young man," observed Mr. Sterne pompously, "take my word for it, you'll repent it if you leave Edinburgh now."

"Robbie, what will everybody think?" cried Mrs. Dunlop tearfully. "You are daft to run away while the world is literally at your feet."

"For how long?" he asked laconically.

"Until you tire of its homage, my lad," replied Lord Glencairn stanchly.

Robert shook his head with a doubting smile. "'Twill not be I who will tire first, my lord," he returned quietly. "I know myself and the world so well. You see the novelty of a poet in my obscure situation, my imperfection of awkward rusticity has raised a partial tide of public notice which has borne me to a height where I am absolutely certain my abilities are inadequate to support me." He looked around a trifle defiantly at the rows of serious faces, a little feeling of resentment welling up in his heart.



"You are over-modest, my dear Burns," observed Mr. Mackenzie with kindling eye.

Robert shook his head with somber dignity. "Too surely do I see the time when the same tide will leave me and recede as far below the mark of truth." He turned and faced the people suddenly, his hands outstretched, his eyes filled with melancholy enthusiasm. Raising his voice he proceeded prophetically, "My friends, you will all bear me witness, that when the bubble of fame was at its height I stood unintoxicated, with the inebriating cup in my hand, looking forward to the hastening time when the blow of calumny should dash it to the ground with all the eagerness of revengeful triumph."

"That time will never come, Robert," cried Mary softly, "for we will leave this life behind us in a very short while noo."

Lord Glencairn slapped him on the back with playful earnestness. "Come, come, my lad!" he cried gayly, "this will never do; you are in the dumps; throw it off, lad, and be merry. Do not heed the idle gossip of your unsuccessful rivals and the scandal mongers. Rest assured your popularity and fame will never die whether you remain here or retire to the country."

"Would I could think so," sighed Robert gloomily.

Eppy suddenly gave a nervous little giggle. "I vow I feel like crying," she observed hysterically, "I wish everybody wouldn't look so mournful."



Mr. Mackenzie turned quickly to his hostess. "My dear Duchess," he said courteously, "you were going to show us your new painting in which Mr. Burns is the central figure of the group."

At once the silent group became animated. "Oh, yes, do!" cried Eppy, with a yearning look at Robert. "I wonder if I could pick you from among the others?" she coyly observed.

"I trust, madam, that my phiz will be recognizable," he replied dryly.

The Duchess turned to her husband. "Take Miss Campbell and lead the way to the gallery," she said quickly.

"Is Mr. Burns to take me?" inquired Eppy of her hostess, but she had followed her husband, leaning on the arm of Mr. Mackenzie.

Lady Glencairn smiled sweetly, "So sorry, Miss McKay, but Sir William has asked for that pleasure."

"I?" gasped Sir William, with a comical look of dismay.

She looked at him maliciously. "Yes, did you not?" she raised her eyebrows inquiringly, an innocent smile hovering about her mouth.

For a moment he sputtered, then with a grim smile he snarled sarcastically, "'Twill afford me great pleasure."

With a wildly beating heart Lady Glencairn took



Robert's arm and started for the stairs, followed by the others.

Eppy sniffed suspiciously. "Oh, I understand now," she observed spitefully with a meaning smile.

"I thought you would, dear," flashed her ladyship mockingly, over her shoulder.

"Are you coming, madam?" demanded Sir William testily, offering his arm.

With an indignant clack of her tongue, Eppy haughtily brushed past him and swiftly mounted the stairs, leaving the disgruntled Sir William to follow at his leisure.



## CHAPTER XVI

AMONG those that crowded around the carriage of Robert Burns earlier in the evening, listening to his inspiring oration, stood a girl of twenty or thereabouts, whose pale, haggard face and tearful eyes attracted some passing attention from those near her. She was dressed in an ankle length skirt of gray, over which a red shawl had been tastefully draped. A black velvet bodice confined the loose white gimpe at the waist, while from her left shoulder a brilliant plaid hung gracefully to the bottom of her dress. Around her neck row upon row of different colored beads hung loosely to her waist. Upon the blue-black hair which fell around her face in waving masses, a wreath of white and pink heather was twined becomingly. Her unusual attire attracted much attention.

“She must be a gypsy,” they told each other wonderingly. Finally, after many conjectures, someone in the crowd volunteered the information that she was a street singer who had been seen singing through the streets of the town for a day or so. Their curiosity appeased, they turned to their idol once more. Every now and then a convulsive sob shook the young girl’s slender, graceful figure. Like one who hungered for food and drink she watched the



speaker, her heart in her eyes, her hands clasped tightly upon her breast. When the eager throng unhitched the horses from the open carriage she had breathlessly watched every movement, and when they, with wild bursts of applause and good-natured laughter, sped away up Princes Street, pulling the carriage behind them, she had swiftly followed, the center of a noisy gang of street urchins and idle brawlers.

With a mighty cheer, which brought the watchmen running to the spot pell-mell, they finally stopped at Athol Castle and quickly lined themselves on each side of the striped awning avenue, from the curbing to the door, to watch the great man pass within.

The gypsy frantically elbowed her way through the pompous coachmen and good-natured cabbies who had pressed forward to witness the new arrival, and reached the inner edge of the crowd. At that moment Robert stepped from his carriage and walked quickly up the avenue. With a little cry of joy she stretched out her hands to arrest his attention, but he passed inside without having once caught a glimpse of this strange follower.

A derisive laugh went up from those who had curiously watched the peculiar actions of the gypsy. At the sound she dropped her arms hurriedly, the blood rushing to her pale cheeks. With one quick, startled glance at the mocking faces beside her, she



turned quickly and threaded her way through the line of splendid equipages, with their prancing horses, till she reached a secluded part of the street, where she stopped and looked back at the brilliantly lighted castle, tears of bitter disappointment and despair slowly trickling down her wan cheeks. As she stood there in the bright moonlight, a prey to her bitter thoughts, a handsome equipage, drawn by a prancing pair of steeds, attracted her listless attention. As it slowly drove past the wretched girl a sweet young face crowned with golden hair appeared in the open window, followed by a white arm. Her little hand was noticeably bare of jewels. With a sweet word of pity the girl tossed a silver piece at the feet of her unfortunate sister. The gypsy indifferently watched the carriage out of sight. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she stooped and picked up the coin, and without looking at it put it carelessly in her pocket, a flush of shame and mortification mantling her dark cheek. For a while she stood in moody silence, listening to the strains of music which came faintly to her from the castle. Suddenly she lifted her face to the heavens, her arms upraised, her lips moving in some prayer or incantation. For a moment she stood thus, then slowly her arms dropped to her side. There was a new calm look of determination in her face as she quickly traced her steps back to where the crowds still lingered about the closed doors of Athol Castle. She stood on the outskirts of



the crowd unseen in the shadow, her restless eyes searching here and there, peering into the open windows, up and down the high stone wall which bordered the huge garden, then back again, finally resting upon the closed portals with a look of keen disappointment shining in their depths. What she sought was evidently not there. She stamped her foot in impotent despair, a muttered imprecation on her lips; she would search again. Gradually she made her way back unnoticed by the crowd, who were intent on listening to the music which floated out bewitchingly on the still air, till she reached the wall where it joined the corner of the castle. Motionless she stood under its shadow, her heart beating loudly as some idler drew near her place of concealment. Suddenly a form loomed up before her. With a startled cry she pressed close against the ivied wall in sudden terror.

"She come this way," a voice cried eagerly.

"Aye, Sandy, she's hidin' among the ivy," said another.

She heard them beating noisily about the thick vines which hung in wild profusion over the walls, her heart in her mouth. Frantically she tore the vines apart until she reached the bare wall behind. Then with breathless eagerness she pulled them together again, effectually concealing her presence from her pursuers. She pressed closer and closer against the cold stones, shivering apprehensively as they approached her hiding place. Suddenly she



felt her support give way with a dull, creaking noise, and before she could recover her equilibrium, she found herself in a heap on the ground. She looked up in time to see the door through which she had fallen swing quickly into place and realized that unwittingly she had found an old and evidently unused entrance through the wall. Quickly rising to her feet she looked about her, then she gave a little cry of joy as she caught sight of the splashing fountains in the moonlight, for she knew she was inside the gardens belonging to the Duke of Athol. Eagerly she gazed about her at the leafy shrubberies, the massive oaks and beeches, the rose garden with its wealth of scented flowers. And for a brief moment she gave herself up to the painful reveries the familiar sights recalled to memory, while the tears of self-pity and heart-longing welled up in her gloomy eyes and flowed unrestrainedly down her cheeks. Presently, with a mirthless laugh of impatience, she dashed the tears angrily away and walked quickly up the grassy terrace toward the brilliantly lighted castle. Through the large window which looked over the low balcony she watched the incessant stream of people coming and going, while others walked aimlessly about the rooms or chatted in groups. For some time she crouched beside the low silver spruce, her eyes fixed upon the moving scenes within. Then with a start she recognized the golden-haired young lady who had given her the silver piece, surrounded by a group of cavaliers. She



saw, too, with a pang of jealousy, the tenderness with which the poet greeted her and led her up to the haughty lady in purple. For some time she watched them in melancholy silence, a prey to conflicting emotions. By and by a group of ladies drifted out on the balcony. They were discussing the golden-haired girl, who had been introduced into their midst that evening, and the announcement of her marriage to the poet, Robert Burns. The gypsy, as she heard those words, uttered a smothered cry of amazement and horror, then sank half fainting on the grassy lawn, moaning like one stricken unto death. How long she lay there with senses dulled by pain she never knew. Presently, bitter recollection returned and with it an agony of fear that blanched her lips and made her limbs to quake, while grief and despair, like two grim sentinels, stood eager watch beside her. Slowly she staggered to her feet and turned her weary eyes once more upon the balcony. There was no one there. Listlessly she watched the gay figures darting past the windows. Suddenly her muscles tightened like a hound's on the scent. The golden-haired girl suddenly glided out on the balcony, a glorious vision of loveliness. Pensively she leaned over the railing watching the swans, which looked ghostly in the moonlight, swimming majestically round and round the small pond of water into which the spraying fountain was playing.



## CHAPTER XVII

MARY soon grew weary of looking at the many paintings which lined the walls of the galleries; she wished they would go back to the pretty rooms downstairs, where the music was playing and the young folks were dancing. She had enjoyed that. She tried to force a smile of interest to her lips as the old Duke described the subjects on the canvases before them. He soon perceived her weariness, however, and calling to Mrs. Dunlop, who was being bored beyond measure, as she told her friends wearily, he requested her to show Miss Campbell the gardens by moonlight, to which she gladly assented. Quickly they descended the broad staircase, and slowly wended their way across the large drawing-room. Mrs. Dunlop took her young charge to the large window and waved her fat hand toward the magnificent view which lay stretched before them. "Isn't it grand, Mary?" she observed lightly. It was an old story to her. Spying an old friend across the room, she excused herself to Mary and told her to enjoy herself, then smilingly left her to her own devices. After admiring the somber beauty of Edinburgh Castle, Mary perceived the flowing fountain which splashed tunefully below her in the garden. She stepped out



on the balcony, a smile of pleasure lighting up her sweet face. For a while she stood listening to the rhythmic fall of the water, blissfully unconscious of the presence of the unseen watcher. Suddenly before her startled vision there sprang the form of the gypsy. With a cry of alarm Mary stepped back and was about to enter the room, when a voice calling her by name arrested her wondering attention.

"Wait, Mary Campbell!" hissed the voice of the gypsy.

Mary turned and looked into the white face gazing up at her so defiantly, and she recognized the girl to whom she had tossed the money. Suddenly she gave a gasp of astonishment. "Jean Armour!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Aye, Jean Armour," repeated the gypsy. "Come down to me; I must have a word with you alone," she whispered sibilantly.

Mary gave a quick look around. Mrs. Dunlop was still deep in her gossip, and Robert was nowhere to be seen. She walked to the end of the balcony and found the steps. Quickly she reached the bottom, and going to Jean took her two hands in hers and shook them warmly. She was so glad to see anyone from Mossgiel, friend or foe.

Jean regarded her advance with sullen suspicion. "Two years ago I was an invited guest here at Athol Castle," she sneered bitterly, "while you were a barefooted dairymaid in Mossgiel. Now look at us. You



are the lady and I am an outcast, singing on the streets for my daily bread."

Mary looked at her in amazement. "But what has happened?" she asked wonderingly.

"My father has turned me into the street," answered Jean dully.

"Had ye done wrong?" inquired Mary timidly.

Jean laughed mirthlessly. "Wrong?" she repeated, "aye, if refusing to marry an old man I detested be wrong."

"An' your father turned ye out for that?"

"For that," she replied stonily, "and because I refused to give up Robert Burns."

"But—but ye gave him up long ago, Jean, of your own free will," faltered Mary, an awful fear clutching at her heart. "An' your father wrote Robert," she continued breathlessly, "that ye willingly, gladly renounced all claims on him, that ye even hated his name, an' that ye hoped never to see or hear o' him again."

A look of hatred spread over the face of the other. "My father lied when he wrote that," she cried with bitter intensity, "for I told him I would never renounce my marriage to Robert, irregular though it was, and I never will. He is my husband," and she glared defiantly at the shrinking girl, who was looking at her with searching, frightened eyes. For a moment the poor child stood there like a lifeless figure as the words stamped themselves



one by one on her bewildered brain and sent it reeling into darkness and vacancy. She felt sick and dizzy. There was a rushing sound in her ears, the garden swung round dizzily before her eyes, yet she stood still, speaking no word, although a quiver of agony passed over her pallid face.

“Oh, Robert, my love, have I lost ye again?” she thought dully. “I knew it was only a dream, too sweet to last.” There was a choking sensation in her throat, but she did not weep. As in a horrid dream she heard the sharp metallic voice hissing in her ear, “He is my husband, Mary Campbell. You must give him up to me.” She roused herself out of the lethargy into which she had fallen, and unclasping her hands, she wearily pushed back her curls from her brow and fixed her large pathetic eyes on Jean, who instinctively shrank back before the speechless despair of that helpless gaze. “But ye have no claim on Robbie noo, Jean,” she faltered slowly, “since your irregular marriage was publicly dissolved.” She paused and her pale lips quivered. “Why have ye come here noo to disturb him?” she asked with infinite pathos. “He is happy, so happy noo. Dinna destroy that happiness; go awa’; leave him to me. Ye took him from me once; dinna separate us again.” Her voice broke and a hard sob choked her utterance. A great pity welled up in Jean’s heart for the stricken child, but she steeled herself against it and remained sul-



lenly quiet. Presently Mary spoke again. "I hae nothing in this world, Jean, and I love him so," she said with dreamy wistfulness, "better than life itsel'. We have loved each ither for years, an' that love has grown stronger an' stronger as each year passed by, till noo it's part o' my very being." Her voice rose to passionate pleading. "Oh, what is your weak fancy compared to such a love, Jean Armour?" she asked piteously. "Oh, I tell you I canna give him up to you again." She sank down convulsively on the high-backed bench under the balcony, her form quivering with low heart-breaking sobs. Tears of sympathy slowly filled Jean's eyes as she watched the grief-stricken girl before her, but with an angry frown she hardened her heart and forced herself to think of her own wrongs and pitiable condition.

"You must give him up!" she answered harshly, "and to-night." She paused a moment to watch the brilliant crowd within the drawing-room, passing and repassing each other with slow, stately bearing as they walked with ease and grace through the dignified measures of the minuet. By and by she turned to the drooping form and spoke again. "My God, girl, don't you suppose I too love him!" she exclaimed passionately. "Why have I tramped mile after mile, half starving, subjected to all kinds of insults, struggling to reach here to see him, if it were not for that love?"



Mary slowly raised her head and looked at her in reproachful sadness. "Your love has only brought him, an' all of us, sorrow and disgrace," she said with pathetic simplicity. "He never loved ye, Jean Armour, ye ken that weel."

Jean winced at the blunt truth, and a quiver of anger passed over her defiant face. "I know that only too well," she replied bitterly. Then she gave a little mocking laugh, which nevertheless held a suggestion of tears. "You may have his heart, Mary Campbell," she continued, "but I am what you can never be, his wife and the mother of his bairns."

"The bairns," repeated Mary blankly, "are they alive, Jean?"

"Yes, they are alive, thank God!" murmured Jean softly, "that is why I am here, Mary, that is why I must demand my rights, for my bairns' sake." Then she continued quickly, feverishly, "Had it not been for them I would have done my father's bidding, would have forgotten Robert, renounced him utterly, and married the man my father had chosen for me, but I wanted my little ones to have the protection of a father's name, so I stubbornly refused his commands. After my father had driven me from his door with curses on his lips, I discovered too late that Robert had tried again and again to see me, had even begged my father to allow him to legalize our marriage, and that his overtures were met with scorn and abuse. Then I decided to come to Edin-



burgh myself to tell Robert the truth and to claim my rights." She paused defiantly.

Lady Glencairn upon her return to the drawing-room had missed Mary, and upon learning from Mrs. Dunlop that she was upon the balcony, she sauntered slowly in that direction. As she stepped through the window she heard the low murmur of voices, and looking down perceived with amazement the young girl seated below her in company with a fantastically-dressed gypsy. Suddenly, with a start, she recognized the voice of Jean Armour. Hastily concealing herself behind a large marble pillar she listened in growing wonder, her face becoming hard and repellent, to the direful confession of her god-daughter.

"I arrived in Edinburgh after a month of hardships," continued Jean with suppressed excitement, "and to-night I saw him in all his prosperity entering the castle like a king, looking so handsome, so contented, and so very happy."

"Yes, he is happy noo," replied Mary softly. "Happier than he'll e'er be on earth again, perhaps," and she closed her eyes wearily.

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the monotonous hum of voices and the faint twanging of the harp from within the drawing-room. Presently Mary opened her eyes and spoke again.

"Ye maunna blame Robert for anything at a', Jean," she said loyally. "He thought the bairns were



dead, an' he believed your father's words, but noo, when he kens a', he will do his duty nobly for his bairns' sake." She smiled bravely into the eager face of the other. "Ye have the right to him, Jean, I see that noo," she continued sadly, "an'—an' forgive my rude and unkind words to ye just noo," and gently she held out her little hand.

Jean took it tenderly in her own. "What will you do now, where will you go?" she asked with a feeling of remorse.

"I shall go back to Colonel Montgomery's," replied Mary, in a sad, spiritless voice, from which all the life seemed to have fled, "where I can see my friends sometimes. Mistress Burns loves me, an' I—I may see Robbie, if only from the window as he passes. It willna harm anyone." She looked at Jean in a pleading, timid manner, while her mouth quivered pathetically, but she forced a wan smile to her pale lips and then slowly turned and walked toward the stairway. As she mounted the bottom step Jean ran quickly to her side and clasped her hand impulsively.

"Mary, I'm so sorry for you," she said pityingly, "but I'm doing it for my bairns' sake, ye ken that."

"I understand, Jean," answered Mary simply, "I dinna blame ye." She leaned back against the marble balustrade. "But, oh, it's hard, bitter hard," she murmured brokenly; "if I could only die here and



noo." She stretched out her hands with a sort of wild appeal. "Oh, Robbie, my darlin'," she exclaimed in a sobbing whisper, "how can I tell ye, how can I break your heart? I thought ye had drunk your cup o' misery empty, but the dregs are yet to be drained."

The sympathetic tears rolled down Jean's face. "Will you tell him I'm here, Mary, and that I must see him at once?" she asked pleadingly. Mary slowly bowed her head in assent. "Oh, how I dread to meet him," continued Jean in a frightened whisper, "to have him look at me with stern and angry eyes; to know that he longs to be free, and that he wishes me dead, perhaps." She covered her face with her hands and shivered apprehensively.

"Ye needna fear, Jean," replied Mary, with reproachful pride. "Robert Burns is a mon of honor; ye should know that weel. I'll go noo an' tell him ye are here." For a moment she swayed as if about to fall, but she recovered herself in an instant and slowly mounted the few remaining steps to the balcony. As she reached the top she pressed her hand against her heart as if that action would still its rapid beating. "Heaven give me the strength to tell him," she breathed, and, with a little prayer on her lips, she slowly entered the drawing-room, where she found Mrs. Dunlop anxiously looking for her.

Jean watched her for a few moments, then, with a sigh of nervous dread, she turned and paced rest-



lessly up and down within the deep shadows beneath the overhanging trees. She had only taken one turn when she felt herself seized by the arm and drawn into the bright moonlight. Smothering the startled cry of alarm which rose to her lips she turned and faced her assailant. "Lady Glencairn!" she gasped, starting back in astonishment.

"So, Jean Armour," hissed her ladyship, "'tis you whose name has been coupled so disgracefully with that of Robert Burns."

Jean dropped her head quickly, flushing crimson before the scornful light in the other's eyes, which flashed like stars in the pale moonlight that came streaming down upon them. "Then you have heard?" she faltered, after a little frightened pause.

"Yes, I have heard everything," her ladyship returned witheringly, "and my suspicions of you of two years ago have turned out to be right."

"Please say no more now, Lady Glencairn," retorted Jean sullenly. "Let me go." She tried to pass, but Lady Glencairn put a restraining hand upon her shoulder. "I will say no more, you foolish girl," she replied angrily. "Why do you insist upon thrusting yourself upon Robert Burns, tonight? He utterly detests your memory. He has done with you forever."

Jean looked at her defiantly. "I am his wife. He must acknowledge me," she declared firmly.

Lady Glencairn laughed scornfully. "You fool-



ish child, do you think he will ever forgive you for stepping in between him and Mary Campbell again?" she asked with studied indifference. "No, he would hate you; you know his erratic temper, my dear Jean; you would but ruin your chance for a reconciliation forever, if he sees you now, when his heart is torn by grief and sorrow at losing for the second time the one lass who is all the world to him." She paused and watched narrowly the look of dread and doubt creep slowly over the downcast face before her.

By and by Jean looked up, her eyes burning with unshed tears and shining feverishly. "What shall I do then, Lady Glencairn?" she asked helplessly, "where shall I go?"

Lady Glencairn did not answer for a few moments. She was thinking with a thrill of joy that Jean's coming would separate the two lovers forever. "More than likely Robert would now remain in Edinburgh," she mused with wildly beating heart. "But, on the other hand, if he stayed he would quixotically marry Jean Armour, and publicly right her in the eyes of the world," she thought jealously, "and then——" She broke off and stared at the girl intently. "If she were out of the way," she thought maliciously, "might not his fickle fancy be caught in the rebound?" These thoughts flowed quickly through her brain, and her eyes half shut wickedly, her gleaming white bosom heaving from her hurried breathing, as she decided on her course. "You must



leave here at once," she said softly, taking Jean's hand with an affectation of tenderness.

"I cannot return to my father," she replied dully. "I have nowhere to go now."

"Go to an inn for to-night," said her ladyship hurriedly, "and I'll come to you in the morning and advise you as to your future movements, and help you."

"But I must see Robert first."

Lady Glencairn frowned impatiently. "Foolish girl, take my advice and wait until to-morrow. You will lose nothing by it, for I will myself plead with Robert in your behalf."

Jean did not answer. She stood mute and undecided.

"Surely, my dear Jean," continued Lady Glencairn mockingly, "you don't expect him to proclaim you as his dearly beloved wife before them all, do you?" She waved her hand carelessly toward the drawing-room.

Jean flushed and looked away. "No, I didn't come for that," she muttered slowly.

"Then why not do as I advise? I know that when the keen edge of his grief has worn off he will willingly take you to his heart and by a church marriage make you his lawful wife," and she threw her warm arm over the shoulders of the yielding girl.

Jean gave a nervous little laugh. "I vow, Lady Glencairn, I have not the courage to meet him now,"



she said. "I—I thank you gratefully for your kindness. I—I know 'tis better to wait——" She paused and sighed dejectedly. "You'll find me at the Star and Garter Inn in King's Court," she said quickly after a moment's indecision. Then she drew her scarf hurriedly about her shoulders as if anxious to get away.

At that instant a laughing group of people came out on the balcony. Lady Glencairn hastily drew her back in the shadows. "Go, go quickly!" she whispered, "before you are seen." With a panting word of thanks Jean glided through the bushes, and, skirting the patches of light, she soon reached the secret door through which she had so unceremoniously entered and passed out to the street now deserted, save for the motionless coachmen asleep on their boxes. Lady Glencairn breathed a sigh of relief as she watched Jean fade out of sight, swallowed up in the darkness. "Both out of the way now," she murmured, a triumphant smile on her full crimson lips. She walked quickly toward the balcony. "What a contemptible creature I have become," she thought with careless unconcern. "And all for love of a low-born peasant," and she laughed derisively, as she mounted the steps. She slowly entered the drawing-room, feeling strangely nervous and guilty, to find a great many people going to supper. Robert had grown tired of the heat and glare and noise, and seeing Mary sitting



so weary and wan looking, surrounded by a crowd of admirers who worshiped at the shrine of youth and beauty, he crossed quickly and whispered his wishes to her. She rose gladly and both advanced to bid their hostess farewell.

"Sorry you cannot remain longer," said the Duchess with genuine cordiality. "You must bring Miss Campbell some afternoon to see me, Mr. Burns, when I am not receiving the public," and with a pleasant smile she bade them good-night. Slowly they made their way through the crowd and met Lady Glencairn coming swiftly toward them.

As her eyes rested upon his happy countenance she knew that he was still in ignorance of Jean's arrival in Edinburgh. "Won't you have some supper?" she inquired brightly. "Don't go yet."

But Robert quietly insisted, as he perceived Mary's increasing languor and pallor. So Lady Glencairn, with anger and disappointment gnawing at her heart, for she had hoped to show him the beauties of the garden by moonlight before he went, seeing that remonstrances were of no avail, bade them both an effusive good-night. "Don't forget my garden party to-morrow," she said with a patronizing smile, touching Mary's cold hand lightly. "I shall expect you," and she turned to greet her husband, who was approaching with Mr. Mackenzie.

"Thank ye, your ladyship," answered Mary simply, making a little courtesy.



"Let me escort you to the carriage, Miss Campbell," said Lord Glencairn, at once offering her his arm.

"And allow me to follow," added Mr. Mackenzie, slipping his arm through Robert's, to whom he whispered, "How dare you, sir, how dare you be such a provokingly happy man in this miserable old world?" Robert laughed, and they all walked slowly down to the carriage, conversing gayly on their way.

Suddenly Mary stopped with a little exclamation of dismay. "We've forgotten Mrs. Dunlop," she said contritely.

With a laugh Lord Glencairn dispatched a footman to find her, and the good lady soon appeared, flushed and panting from her hurried departure. With a last handshake all around Robert sprang in beside them and within a couple of minutes the carriage was out of sight.

"Ye were the queen of the evening, Mary, just as I told ye ye'd be," said Robert triumphantly. "Have ye enjoyed yoursel'?"

"Ay, for a whiley," answered Mary listlessly, leaning back against the heavy padding of the seat, with eyes heavy and sad. She had had no opportunity as yet to tell Robert the dread news, and her heart was filled with misgivings as she thought of Jean waiting patiently in the garden for him to come to her. She started up suddenly, resolved to



tell him, but the sight of his happy face, and the presence of Mrs. Dunlop, cooled her courage, and she leaned back again silent and miserable. If she didn't tell him to-night what would Jean do? With her usual unselfishness she gave no thought to self. She was miserably unhappy, but she would not allow herself to think of her own sufferings. Her whole thought was of him and the darkness into which he would soon be plunged, and of Jean and her bairns, Robert's bairns. She sighed quiveringly, and a little pang of jealousy shot through her heart like a breath of fire, but it soon passed away and left only a dull ache that would always be there now, she thought wearily, as they rolled along toward home. She clasped her hands together feverishly. "Should she whisper to him now, tell him all and bid him drive back to Jean?" she asked herself in an agony of indecision. At that moment the carriage stopped at the door of Mrs. Dunlop's mansion. It was too late now. She gave a little sigh of relief, though her heart was filled with grief and anxiety. Robert escorted her to the door, with loving pride in her daintiness, in her sweet air of refinement. She looked very frail and spirituelle, as she turned to him quietly and bade him good-night.

"Has something gone wrong, Mary?" he inquired solicitously, noticing with alarm her wan face, her languid air of weariness.

She shook her head slowly, not daring to trust



her voice. Mrs. Dunlop put her arm about her fondly.

“The lassie is tired, Robert,” she said in her motherly way, “and no wonder. She’ll be as bright as a lark in the morning.” Bidding them both a tender good-night, he turned and ran down the steps, jumped into the carriage, and drove off toward his chambers, whistling softly to himself the tune of “Mary of Argyle.”



## CHAPTER XVIII

THE next day a grand garden party was given at Glencairn Hall. All Edinburgh was invited, and they came eagerly to see the great poet, who was on the eve of leaving the social world to retire to his farm in Ayrshire, and to see Highland Mary, the dainty, flower-like sweetheart of their idol. The grounds looked very bright and gay. Refreshment booths of red and white canvas were dotted here and there on the smooth velvet lawns. Bright flags of all nations waved from different parts of the gardens—signals of putting, archery, and dancing—and the seductive music of the Queen's theater orchestra rose up and joined the songs of birds and the tinkle of the fountains in full play. Girls in light summer costumes were grouped picturesquely beneath the stately oaks and beeches. Gay laughter echoed from the leafy shrubberies, and stray couples were seen sauntering carelessly through the rose gardens, too much absorbed in each other to notice what was going on around them.

Presently out of the same rose garden a man walked hurriedly, followed by a woman, who quickly overtook him, to his perceptible annoyance. They were Sir William Creech and Eppy McKay. Eppy



looked exceedingly ugly in the full glare of the bright sun. She was dressed in a brilliant plaid gown, the style of which seemed to accentuate her angularity; and a huge Gainsborough hat was perched jauntily upon her towering court wig. Her small green eyes looked coquettishly at her irate companion. He stopped and glared at her fiercely.

"But I desire to take a smoke," he said wrathfully.

"I don't object to smoke, Sir William," she tittered coyly.

He looked about him wildly as if seeking some means of escape from his admirer. "But I wish to be alone," he cried almost pleadingly.

She opened her eyes and regarded him reproachfully. "Oh, you are joking, Sir William, but you cannot scare me away."

With a groan of despair he continued his walk, hoping to escape from his persistent admirer. "Great heavens! I'll go daft yet," he muttered as he perceived her close at his elbow. For a few minutes he puffed furiously at his pipe, casting angry glances from time to time at his unwelcome companion, who trotted along so contentedly at his side. Finally Sir William concluded that he could not elude her attentions for the time being, so decided to make the best of the infliction. "Do I go too fast for you?" he asked maliciously, as he heard her puffing away vigorously beside him.



"No, indeed," she replied with a little breathless giggle. "You couldn't go too fast for me, for I am as light and quick on my feet as ever I was. In faith, why shouldn't I be?" she continued gayly. "I am only 32. You see I am so much younger than you."

He snorted angrily. "Well, you don't look it," he retorted. She stopped short and looked at him in amazed indignation.

"What?" she quavered, a little out of breath, "I don't look younger than you?"

At the sign of approaching tears, Sir William frowned impatiently. "I mean you don't look—32," he said diplomatically.

She simpered and thanked him for the compliment.

He smiled grimly as he said to himself, "She's over 60 if she's a day."

"They all tell me I don't look my age," she said gushingly. "It's my artistic soul that keeps me so young and fresh-looking." They sat down on a bench, glad of the opportunity to cool themselves after their strenuous walk. "Do you know," she said dreamily, fanning herself, "I am very different from most artistic people." He looked at her. "Oh my, yes, indeed!" she affirmed convincingly. "I don't live in the clouds, I am of the earth earthy," and she gave him another languishing look.

"Ye don't tell me," he retorted mockingly.

"But I love art," sighed Eppy ecstatically.



"When I was young," she went on reminiscently, "I mean when I was younger," she corrected herself with a startled look at her silent companion, "I came near having a painting from my own hand hung in the National Gallery."

"You are a clever woman," he remarked sarcastically.

"It was this way," she explained volubly. "I had painted a lovely marine. I do marines much better than anything else," with a self-conscious smirk, "and upon showing it to Mr. William Nichol, a dear man, but one who drinks to excess, he promised to mention it to the Lord Mayor. Well, it made me exceedingly nervous, I vow. However, I bought a most lovely frame for it, Nile green in color, with sweet red plush ends." She cleared her throat affectedly and continued with evident delight. "I do like things to match," she explained, "and the green was the exact shade of the water. It was simply exquisite." She clasped her hands together and rolled her eyes heavenward. "And the red ends exactly matched the cow, which was a lovely shade of——"

"Cow?" echoed Sir William in amazement. "Did I hear you say cow?"

Eppy looked at him pettishly. She didn't like to be so violently interrupted. "Certainly a cow," she returned frigidly. "Is there anything strange in a cow?" and she drew herself up with an injured air.



"No, there's nothing strange in a cow when it is by itself," replied Sir William dryly, "but in a marine, well, it is a little hard on the cow."

"You don't know what you are saying, Sir William," flashed Eppy indignantly. "Please don't interrupt me again. The cow I have reference to was in one corner drinking. I heard Lady Nancy Gordon telling Mrs. McLehose that the cow looked as if it were trying to drink the ocean dry; the idea!" and she clucked her tongue against her teeth in contemptuous scorn. "She's a cat," she continued spitefully; "I never could bear her. She was uncommon jealous of me, yes, indeed, but that's another matter."

Sir William turned crimson, and seemed about to choke, as he tried to smother his laughter. "You were telling me about your marine," he finally stutted.

"Don't hurry me, Sir William," said Eppy coquettishly. "Well, I took it to Lord Mundobbo. You know whom I mean; at that time he had something to do with the National Gallery; Mr. Nichol didn't inform me as to his exact connection with it." She paused and gazed soulfully into space. "Shall I ever forget the day? The sun was high in the heavens—but there," she broke off with a deprecating smile. "I really must restrain my poetic impulse. But as I was saying," she rambled on quickly, "the sky was overcast and threatening snow——"



"I thought the sun was shining, Miss McKay," interrupted Sir William gruffly.

She was beginning to get on his nerves again. "I am a little mixed in my metaphors," apologized Eppy condescendingly, "but you flustrate me so, Sir William," and she tapped him playfully with her fan. "Well, I felt that victory was mine. I took off the paper—it was pink, tied with a yellow string—and laid it before him." She paused impressively, then she continued in an elocutionary tone of voice. "He gazed at it long and silently. He was simply speechless. I knew he'd be. I said to him, 'Lord Mundobbo, as much as it grieves me to part with my—ahem—masterpiece, for the sake of art I will permit you to add it to the collection of paintings in the National Gallery.' Said he, 'Miss McKay, really I appreciate this honor you do me and the National Gallery. It is a masterpiece of its kind, but I cannot accept it.'"

"The brute!" exclaimed Sir William in mock anger. "Why not?"

"He said if I would change the ocean into a fresh water pond and give the cow a chance, he might consider it," and Eppy tearfully regarded her now laughing companion with an aggrieved air.

"Did ye do it?" inquired Sir William, rising to his feet.

"Did I do it!" repeated Eppy with horror expressed in every tone of her voice, every feature of



her pointed face. "No, sir," she replied emphatically. "Never would I willingly spoil a work of art. That was my first and only. I couldn't improve on it. But my artistic soul was smothered, and now another, a poetic spirit has taken its place." She smiled dreamily, a sigh of content escaping her parted lips.

"A case of the survival of the fittest, eh?" he retorted brusquely.

For a moment they walked on in silence, Sir William wondering how to get rid of the incubus, and Eppy happy over the impression she fondly imagined she had made upon Sir William. Just then a bend in the avenue brought them in full view of the broad terrace in front of the hall, where Robert's handsome figure was outlined clearly against the dazzling blue of the sky. Several people were grouped near him. He seemed to be in animated conversation with some of them, and his face was radiant with smiles. With a cry of delight, Eppy hurried forward to greet him, forgetting Sir William utterly, much to his amazement. That she, or anyone, would dare leave him so unceremoniously to join Robert Burns angered him beyond measure. He followed her slowly at some little distance, with no very pleasant expression on his stern features.

Later in the afternoon when it was close to sunset, and all other amusements had given way to the delight of dancing Sir Roger de Coverly on the



springy green turf to the silvery music of the orchestra, Mary and Mrs. Dunlop put in their appearance. Mary was looking very beautiful in a clinging, old-fashioned white crepe de chene, another old relic of Mrs. Dunlop's dead and gone slim youth. While they danced, she reclined languidly in a low chair, her sad eyes fixed mournfully upon Robert's glowing face as he lay stretched in lazy length at her feet. The day had passed and still she had had no opportunity to tell him the dire news, for she had not seen him since the night before.

While the dancing was in progress a liveried page walked noiselessly over the turf and stopping beside the recumbent figure of the poet, quietly handed him a note. He leisurely opened it and read it at a glance. "Say I'll be right there," he said to the waiting page after a moment's meditation. He excused himself to Mary and the others and followed the man indoors, with a frown of impatient wonder clouding his brow.

Under the shadow of a noble maple, Lady Glencairn was seated in earnest conversation with her uncle. Her ladyship was looking exceedingly beautiful in a pink-flowered summer silk, which puffed and billowed around her, with a bunch of white heather at her breast and a wreath of the same dainty flowers in her picturesque Leghorn hat. She held a pink-lined parasol over her head, and from under the protecting shadow her dark lustrous eyes flashed dis-



dainfully as she regarded her scolding companion. Suddenly she gave a start and leaned forward to watch the group opposite. She had noticed the quiet entrance of the servant and the immediate departure of the poet, and idly wondered who it was that desired to see Robert on such urgent business that they must needs follow him here. The minutes passed and still he did not return. She was growing anxious. "Suppose"—and she started violently at the sudden thought—"suppose it was by some unfortunate chance Jean Armour herself?" She rose quickly to her feet, with a word of apology and after a quick look around, in which she noticed Mary's pale face and restless manner, she walked leisurely toward the house. Once inside she rang for the page and upon questioning him learned that the young woman who had insisted on seeing Mr. Burns, and who was none other than Jean Armour, as she concluded from the man's description, had just gone, and that Mr. Burns was now seated in the drawing-room alone. Hastily dismissing him, she stole softly into the parlors, and there beside the table, his face in his hands, sat Robert, his shoulders heaving convulsively. She looked at him a moment and the tears of pity came into her luminous eyes. Then softly she walked to his side and laid her cool hand upon his feverish head. "Robert, I am so sorry for you," she said gently.

He lifted his head with a start and rose quickly



to his feet. It didn't occur to him to ask what she meant or to inquire how she knew what had happened in that room, and she was secretly glad that he demanded no explanation. "Where is she?" he asked dully.

"She has gone," she answered quickly. "I—I met her at the door and offered to assist her, gave her money and advised her not to make any unnecessary scandal in town, but to return to her home at once. You know she is my godchild. So she promised to go, and I presume she is now on her way." She looked him straight in the eyes as she glibly told this falsehood. She didn't know what arrangements he had made with Jean, but she daringly made the lying explanation, confident that he would believe it, for he could have no possible reason for suspecting her motives, or any means of finding out at present that she had not indeed met Jean, who might have altered her plans at the last moment.

A look of anger came over his face for a moment, then as quickly died away, and his eyes filled with a hopeless, despairing look. He walked slowly to the window, his hands clenched together behind him, and stood there, pale and miserable and wretched, gazing out upon the scene of happiness he had just left.

Lady Glencairn watched him with eyes filled with passion, and her heart beat with painful thuds as she fought against the desperate longing to throw herself into his arms and comfort him. She glided



quickly to his side and put her hand gently within his arm and stood there in sympathetic silence although she was consumed with jealousy as she watched his melancholy eyes riveted on the fair face of his lost sweetheart. For a while they stood there in gloomy quiet. Presently a deep, heart-rending sigh, which was almost a sob, escaped his trembling lips.

“An’ we were so happy a few minutes ago,” he murmured brokenly. “An’ noo ’tis all over.” He paused and bit his lips convulsively. Presently he went on in a dull, low tone as if speaking to himself, “How true it is, there’s many a slip ’twixt cup and lip.” Lady Glencairn pressed his arm tenderly, but remained silent. “What have I to live for noo?” he continued with despairing mournfulness.

“Everything, Robert,” murmured her ladyship tenderly, gazing up into his face with glittering eyes.

He turned and looked at her in wonder. As he saw the feverish flush on her face, felt her hot breath on his cheek, he remembered with a start her peculiar words and meaning looks at Athol Castle the night before. Lady Glencairn noted with apprehension the look of stern coldness spread quickly over his face, and the nervous tears of disappointment and passionate longing welled up in her eyes. Then with reckless abandon she dropped her head against his shoulder and let the tears flow unrestrainedly. For a



moment Robert stood there speechless with surprise and horror, for he knew at last that what he had vaguely feared was an indisputable fact; knew that his hostess, the wife of his dearest friend and counselor, entertained a guilty passion for him. It filled him with righteous anger that she would willingly betray the love and confidence of the noblest gentleman in the kingdom. He placed the weeping woman in a chair and stood looking down upon her with a frown of displeasure. "Lady Glencairn," he said coldly, "if these tears are for my unhappy fate, I thank ye for your sympathy."

She caught his hand and held it tightly within her arm. "Oh, no, no, Robert, 'tis not that," she whispered passionately. "Do you not remember the Lady of the Lake I told you of last evening?" He made no reply. Then she continued slowly, her voice low and shaking, "Read my fate in that of hers."

Still he would not understand her. "I fear I do not understand your meaning, my lady," he replied, trying to withdraw his hand from her grasp, but she held it firmly.

"Cannot your heart understand mine?" she cried recklessly. "Does it not pity my wretchedness?"

He was silent for a moment. He knew he could no longer parry with her, for her words and meaning were too plain to admit of any misunderstanding. He turned to her, his face set and firm. "Lady Glencairn," he said sternly, "you dishonor yourself



by such madness, and all for naught. My heart is noo numb with sorrow, it could feel no throb of yours, even were I vile enough to see no evil in usurping your husband's rights."

"Do not remind me of my unhappiness!" she exclaimed impatiently. "I married him when I was a girl, before I knew what love was. Then you came into my life, and I knew that the fire of love was not dead within me." Her rich seductive voice trembled with passion.

"I pray you cease!" he entreated her, but she went on rapidly.

"Let me speak, Robert!" she cried, clinging to him frantically. "I can no longer contain myself, for I love you better than my life, better than my honor, my good name; I care not for them now. Oh, pity me, pity me!" and she flung herself down on her knees before him and burst into a storm of irrepressible weeping.

Robert looked around apprehensively. The thought that someone might suddenly enter the room filled him with alarmed dismay. With a quick movement he raised her to her feet, and his voice trembled with deep feeling when he next spoke. "I do pity you," he said sorrowfully, "but I pity your husband more, when he learns of your faithlessness." He paused and regarded her with reproachful sadness. "Oh, why have you severed forever the threads of our friendship by such imprudence, such rash-



ness?" As he finished he bowed his head and walked slowly toward the door.

"Do not leave me like this!" she panted desperately. "Can't you see you are killing me by your coldness." She held out her arms in piteous entreaty as she continued tenderly, "Tell me you didn't mean it, Robert. Say you are but testing my love for you."

He turned on her quickly and at his look of contemptuous scorn she drooped her head and the hot blood rushed to her face. "Are you lost to all sense of prudence, honor and decency?" he cried in scathing accents. "Heaven knows I'm no moralist, no saint," and he gave a mirthless little laugh as he thought of the opinion Edinburgh had formed concerning his morality—then he went on firmly, solemnly, "But I would sooner cut this erring heart of mine out of this body than fall so low as to betray the honor of my friend who trusts me." She started to speak again, but he raised his hand quickly. "Say no more, Lady Glencairn," he said with calm dignity, "an' I'll forget this distressing conversation, and continue thro' life to respect equally with himself, the wife of my friend."

Slowly the warm color faded from her cheeks, leaving her ashy pale, while through her suddenly narrowed eyelids a vindictive light gleamed tigerishly.

"You've said enough!" she hissed through her



clenched teeth. "I have lowered myself to you as I would to no other man living, only to be scorned and humiliated. God!" she laughed wildly, hysterically, and threw herself face downward upon the ottoman. "Fool, fool!" she cried with bitter self-abasement. "How I hate and despise myself for what I have done; would I had died before I had uttered such damning words," and she beat her jeweled hands frantically against the cushions.

"I beseech you to be careful, Lady Glencairn," cried Robert in amazed alarm, going to her.

She turned on him fiercely. "You, of all men, posing as a model of virtue and goodness, prating of husband's honor, wife's duty." She measured him with a scornful, sneering glance of fury. "You, who have the name of making love to every female in petticoats who crosses your path, you hypocrite!"

Robert fixed his eyes upon her in silence and the utter scorn of the look stung her heart to its center. Presently he controlled his anger sufficiently to be able to speak, and still eying her with that straight, keen look of immeasurable disdain, he said in cold, deliberate accents, "Your ladyship has been misinformed as to my past conduct. I do not claim to be more than human, but I know my name is as yet clear from the taint of dishonor."

"You poor fool, you country yokel!" she stormed furiously, walking up and down between him and



the door like a caged lioness. "Did you think you could scorn such a woman as I with impunity? Do you think I will stand the humiliation of being repulsed, despised, shamed? I tell you no, no, never; 'tis but a step from love to hate, you should know that." She paused in her nervous walking and stood facing him, her eyes ablaze with the uttermost anger, her beautiful figure drawn rigidly erect. "You shall be made to feel the depth of my hatred before long, Robert Burns," she threatened, and there came a dangerous gleam in the flashing, dark eyes.

"I shall leave Edinburgh within the hour," replied Robert quietly. Was there ever such another unfortunate being as himself? he thought grimly, and a wave of unutterable sadness rushed over him.

"Aye, that you will," retorted her ladyship with a sneering, bitter laugh. "But not as you anticipate, with the plaudits of the world ringing in your ears. Instead of that, only contemptuous silence will greet your departure as you leave here in shame and disgrace, and when you have sunk once more into poverty and oblivion, you will repent bitterly ever having made an enemy of Alice Glencairn." As these words left her lips, she swept haughtily past him like an outraged queen and left the room, leaving him standing there like one in a trance.

He brushed his hands across his eyes as if to assure himself that he was awake, that he wasn't the subject



of some hideous hallucination, but no, he was painfully conscious of the reality of it all. He heaved a deep sigh and sank wearily into a chair, his eyes riveted upon the floor in melancholy meditation. A little cry aroused him from the profound gloom into which his thoughts were plunged and looking fearfully up, dreading lest her ladyship had returned, his eyes rested upon the white, startled face of Highland Mary. She had watched him leave the grounds with listless curiosity, which changed to wonder and dismay when Lady Glencairn rose from her seat and sauntered toward the hall. For some minutes she nervously sat there wondering vaguely why he stayed so long and why her ladyship had followed him. Presently she rose and mechanically made her way over the springy sward toward the house. She couldn't have told why she went or what she intended to do. She wondered in a vague way if Robert's message could in any way concern Jean, but her thoughts dwelt longer upon the suspicions that had been raised in her innocent heart against her beautiful hostess, for she had recognized her as the bogus Lady Nancy in spite of the disguising mask, suspicions that filled her with uneasiness and alarm; and yet why should she be jealous? She told herself sadly she had renounced him forever, given him back to Jean, and in a few days she would pass out of his life forever. Oh, the agony that pierced her heart at the recollection of her past happiness! How



fleeting it had been—scarcely a week. She had drawn near the window by this time quite unconsciously. Suddenly the sound of voices within the room made her pause. She had not thought to listen nor meant to, but when she heard the passionate pleading voice of her ladyship and the stern replies from Robert, a feeling of fascinated horror took possession of her, rooting her to the spot. Motionless she stood there and heard all that passed within the room. And when the voices stopped and all was deathly still, she peered through the window. At the sight of her dear one sitting there all alone, with that look of intense suffering on his face, her heart cried out to him in sympathy. Quickly she opened the high French window and noiselessly stepped into the room. For a moment she stood watching him, her eyes filled with patient sorrow, infinite pity, and a world of loving compassion. Involuntarily a deep sigh escaped her. As he raised his head she went quietly up to him and placed a tender hand upon his arm. After one quick, heart-broken look at her he buried his face in his hands again.

“Dinna distress yoursel’, laddie; I have known since last night at Athol Castle that our happy dream was ended.” She felt him stiffen beneath her touch. “Jean came to me in the gardens,” she explained with patient resignation. “I should have told ye last night, for she was waiting for ye to come to her, but I—I hadna’ the courage.”



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There was silence for a moment, then he spoke in a low, spiritless tone.

“Jean said that ye knew all,” he said without looking up. They remained quiet after that, plunged in bitter thought. There was nothing they could say to comfort each other, the wound was bleeding too freely as yet. Presently Robert raised his head, and with a despairing gesture pushed the heavy curls back from his fevered brow and rose unsteadily to his feet. They must get away at once, he thought feverishly. He took Mary by the hand and started for the door, when from the open window he heard his name called. Turning apprehensively he beheld Sir William Creech entering, followed by Lord Glencairn and several of his guests. In his hand Sir William held a newspaper, while a hard smile of triumph wrinkled his stern face.

“I told ye, Robert Burns, ye would overreach yourself,” he cried jubilantly, shaking the newspaper at him.

Robert looked at him apathetically. “Ye were ever a bird of ill omen,” he said quietly. “What have I done noo?”

“You have seen fit to sign your name to an article in this paper, which has aroused the indignation of all Edinburgh,” replied Sir William without any preamble. “’Tis a most seditious article and shows that ye have embraced the doctrines of the French Revolution.”

“A man has a perfect right to his opinion,” said



Mrs. Dunlop decidedly, giving Sir William a scornful look.

"Indeed he has," echoed Eppy, nodding her head briskly. "I mean to stick to mine."

Lord Glencairn turned and looked searchingly at Robert's pale, gloomy face. "Is that true, Robert?" he asked gently.

Robert did not reply. He seemed not to hear, in fact.

"'Tis a most serious charge, Mr. Burns," remarked Mr. Sterne gravely.

"If it be true," retorted Mr. Mackenzie loyally.

"Which is not at all likely," flashed Eppy indignantly.

She would believe nothing wrong of her hero, even if it were proven in black and white.

"But listen!" continued Sir William eagerly. He scanned the article through quickly until he found what he sought. "Ah, here it is. It is stated here that Mr. Burns refused to stand up in the theater recently when 'God save the King' was being played," and he glared about him indignantly.

A quiet sneer curled Robert's lips. "Anything else?" he asked sarcastically. "Out wi' it or the venom of your spleen will poison ye," and he fixed his eyes upon Sir William with disdainful indifference.

"And there is more," snarled Sir William. "'Tis known that ye have sent two cannon to the French Directorate with a complimentary letter, offering further assistance."



"Oh, no, no, impossible." cried Lord Glencairn incredulously.

"And," continued Sir William vindictively, "there's also a full account here which explains much of Mr. Burns' reprehensible conduct here in town, as well as in Ayrshire, where it seems his amours were as numerous and questionable as they are at the present time."

"For shame, Creech!" cried Lord Glencairn with indignation.

"How fascinating he must have been even when a farmer," giggled Eppy aside to Mrs. Dunlop, who was casting indignant glances at Sir William.

"'Tis a libelous article," she flashed angrily, "and I for one do not believe a word of it. Robert," she said, turning to the silent figure standing so pale and calm before his inquisitors, "deny this absurd charge before it is given further credence!"

"He cannot deny it," said Sir William. "His name is at the bottom of it," and he held it up to their view.

"And I'll attempt no denial," replied Robert in a full ringing voice, "for I know it would be useless. Know, then, that I do sympathize with the French people in their struggle for freedom, and I did help them all that lay in my power. I hope that France may gain the prize for which she is fighting, a free and independent republic, and that she may set up her standard of liberty and independ-



ence as did the United States of America, when they were delivered from the toils of the British."

There was an uncomfortable silence when he had finished his declaration. His amazed and incredulous listeners could hardly believe they had heard him aright. They looked aghast at each other, not knowing just how to take it. Their embarrassed silence was soon broken, however.

"Ye hear those seditious sentiments," cried Sir William in an I-told-you-so tone of voice.

Lord Glencairn shook his head gravely. "'Tis dangerous to speak thus, Robert," he said with solemn earnestness. "You should be careful——"

"Careful of what?" interrupted Robert with impatient scorn. "Lest I offend people with my plain speaking of the truth?" He paused and looked around him with flashing eyes and dilated nostrils. "Who is careful of my feelings?" he demanded. "Not those who think themselves my superiors by accident of birth." He turned to Sir William Creech and continued quickly, his voice vibrating with suppressed indignation. "I've never wronged ye, Sir William Creech, yet ye are miscreant enough to seek my ruin, for I'm fair sure 'twas ye yourself who inserted that scurrilous article in that paper ye hold in your hand, in which my faults, my past errors and follies are now being aired."

Sir William turned a sickly color. "Think what you like," he muttered savagely. "'Tis time the



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people of Edinburgh knew the character of the man they are honoring."

"Sir William Creech, you are an old brute!" cried Eppy, her little gray eyes flashing fire, and going up to him she continued in haughty disdain, "Remember, sir, I will have naught to do with you in the future; I turn my back on you," and she suited the action to the word.

Meanwhile, Robert had spoken in an undertone to Mrs. Dunlop, and that good soul, putting an arm around Mary, who stood white and trembling like a frightened child, walked to the door, and Robert, after a formal inclination of his head, started quietly but proudly after them. They had reached the door, when it suddenly opened and Lady Glencairn stood upon the threshold, her head held haughtily erect, her lips curled in a disdainful sneer. She entered the room and closed the door behind her, then turned and faced the wondering group which was being augmented by the entrance, through the window, of a number of the guests whose curiosity had been aroused by the unusual scene to which they had been listening in speechless amazement.

"Alice, what has happened?" cried Lord Glencairn in an alarmed voice. Her ladyship's white, nervous face, the peculiar glitter in her eyes, startled him out of his usual calmness.

"James, I am deeply sorry to wound you," she began nervously, "but it's best that you should



know how grievously you have been betrayed by one of your honored guests here to-day," and she fixed her narrowed eyes upon the startled face of Robert Burns.

A great fear of impending danger came over him as he saw the revengeful look which she flashed at him, and he involuntarily straightened himself as if to receive a shock. There was a surprised movement among the crowd, and a low murmur of many voices broke the tense stillness which followed her accusation.

"I—betrayed?" repeated Lord Glencairn, in astonishment. "What mean you, my dear?"

"I mean," she answered, and the lie rolled glibly off her crimson lips, "that your distinguished guest, Robert Burns, has to-day wantonly and without provocation grossly insulted the wife of his friend and host." As the ignoble lie left her lips, there was an audible indrawn breath of startled surprise from the amazed listeners. Then they turned and fixed their wondering gaze upon the accused man, who, after an inarticulate exclamation of horror, stood as though carved out of stone.

"I for one do not believe it," cried Mrs. Dunlop indignantly, and she returned Lady Glencairn's look of haughty displeasure with a withering glance of scornful disbelief.

"Nor I," schoed Eppy, with a youthful toss of her head.

"What was the nature of the insult, Alice?"



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asked Lord Glencairn gravely. No doubt she had taken offense where no offense was intended, he thought indulgently.

Before she could answer, Robert stepped quickly up to her with flashing eyes and lips trembling with anger. "Madam, that I have had the misfortune to offend ye, I am sorrowfully aware," he said with bitter sarcasm, "but that I have been guilty of offering ye an insult, none knows better than yourself how little cause ye have to accuse me of such monstrous ingratitude, such a contemptible betrayal of the laws of hospitality. I am quite willing that you should repeat every word of the conversation that passed between us in the room a few minutes since, and if aught that I have said can be construed as an insult to your ladyship, then do I stand ready and willing to abide by the consequence of such an indiscretion." He looked her straight in the eyes, and with folded arms calmly waited for her to speak.

Not long did she return the look, however, for the utter scorn of it stung her guilty heart to its core. Not that she felt any compunction for what she was doing—her whole soul was up in arms against him, and she would not stop until she had meted out her spiteful revenge upon him to the fullest extent. His evident contemptuous defiance irritated her beyond measure—she was angrier with him than ever—already she had a sort of strange feeling of triumph



at the vengeance she had designed, for she knew that her word would be believed against his; even now she could read suspicion and conviction in many of the serious faces that surrounded her, much to her satisfaction. He had thrown down the challenge, had he? Well, she would take it up. No one knew what had passed between them save themselves, and no one would ever know the truth, and the truth would now be a very small factor in working out her present scheme of vengeance. All these thoughts flashed quickly through her mind, and her answer was ready on her lips almost soon as he had finished speaking. With well-simulated indignation she drew herself haughtily away from him, with a gesture of repulsion. "Dare you deny your protestations of love and devotion?" she replied. "Why, my lord," she continued scornfully, turning to her husband, who was now regarding Robert with serious, thoughtful eyes, a look of wounded pride and deepening sorrow gradually shadowing his noble countenance, "before I could stop him he had fallen upon his knees and begged me to be false to you, and to give him my love, my favors."

"Great God!" cried Robert, staggering back, white and speechless, while a wave of the blackest despair engulfed him completely, for he knew that the outrageous lie had sealed his doom as utterly as though it had been the truth; knew that all denials from him would be useless in the face of that accusa-



tion. He sank back into a chair in helpless resignation, his independent spirit, his haughty pride wounded almost unto death.

When Mary heard the lying accusation she started forward with a little cry on her lips. Freeing herself from Mrs. Dunlop's restraining hand, she took a few steps toward Lord Glencairn, her face aglow with indignation, her timidity, her fear of the great ones surrounding her, forgotten for the moment, as she sought to defend the man she loved.

"My lord!" she cried thrillingly, "'tis not true; Robbie did not insult her ladyship, for I——"

But, with an angry flush, Lady Glencairn interrupted her. "I say he did," she retorted harshly. Then, as Mrs. Dunlop drew the frightened girl away, she continued with insulting emphasis, "James, bid this man and his virtuous Highland Mary begone at once! Their presence here is an insult to respectable people," and she flashed them a malicious look.

"Alice, Alice!" exclaimed Lord Glencairn, in accents of deep reproach, "that is unworthy of you."

Robert felt as though he must choke with fury. He forgot the presence of Lord Glencairn. He forgot everything but his just indignation. "My God!" he cried passionately, striding up to the sneering woman, "you dare to speak so—you!"

"Yes, I!" she returned coolly, eying him dis-



dainfully up and down. "What have you to say against me?" She drew herself up imperiously.

"Only this," replied Robert in a low, tense voice, "ye may say what you will of me, but as ye value your happiness, do not breathe aught against the fair name of Mary Campbell."

She uttered an angry exclamation, but remained speechless and so pale that her lips were devoid of color. If he were dishonorable enough to tell everything, she thought, with a thrill of fear, it would make things decidedly embarrassing and humiliating for her, besides giving her enemies a choice bit of scandal, which they would use to excellent advantage.

At this point a few of the guests, feeling decidedly uncomfortable and very much *de trop*, quietly left the room, but the others, and the room was filled, held their ground, shamelessly reveling in the extraordinary scene, the like of which had never before been seen in an Edinburgh drawing-room, which was being enacted before them.

"Robert, lad," whispered Mrs. Dunlop, in a loud aside, "ye must say something. Deny this charge. I know you are innocent of any wrong doing. Speak, tell his lordship so!" and she pointed to where he stood crushed and silent, in speechless sorrow.

"What can I say, Mrs. Dunlop?" replied Robert, in an agony of indecision. "Would ye have me



flatly contradict her ladyship and accuse her of lying?" He paused a moment with patient sadness. "Nay, nay, friend, there is nothing I can say noo that will smooth matters or clear me in the eyes of the world."

"But you must tell them the truth," insisted Mary. "Dinna' let them believe this monstrous thing of you." She looked indignantly at the cold repellent face of her ladyship, and continued fearlessly, "She's a bold, wicked woman, and she seeks your ruin!"

"How dare you, you insolent creature!" hissed her ladyship furiously, while the amazed guests looked in open-mouthed amazement at the demure little dairymaid so suddenly transformed, standing with head thrown back and eyes flashing accusingly.

But Robert remained rigidly silent. He would not be so base, so ungrateful as to shatter his benefactor's belief in his wife's honor, her veracity, he told himself in a spirit of self-sacrifice. He owed all he had in the world to him, and he would remain silent for his sake, and he kept his eyes fixed unresponsively on the rug at his feet, but the little drops of perspiration stood out on his brow, as he fought against the temptation to clear his good name from ignominy.

Throwing open the door Lady Glencairn pointed to it dramatically, "There's the door, Mr. Burns,"



she said insolently; "do not compel me to call my servants."

"Jezebel!" muttered Mr. Mackenzie through his clenched teeth.

"If he goes I go too," flashed Mrs. Dunlop, casting an indignant look at her hostess.

"So will I," echoed Eppy.

"Wait!" cried Mary vibrantly. Her silvery voice rang out above the confusion, as the guests moved about among themselves asking all sorts of inane questions, exploiting their views upon the subject—some loudly extolling Lady Glencairn's attitude in the matter and others as stoutly defending the bard. Instantly there was an astonished hush.

"My lords and ladies," continued Mary thrillingly, "listen to me! I tell ye that Robert Burns is innocent o' this contemptible charge laid against him. I know it, for I was outside the window yonder an' heard all that passed between him and her ladyship."

"Spy!" hissed Lady Glencairn between her teeth, unheard in the hubbub of voices which had commenced again with Mary's statement as the subject of comment, then she laughed mockingly. "How absurd," she cried to those about her. "My dear James, let us end this scene. I will not stay here to be insulted. Come, my friends, let us retire," and she took her husband's arm.

"Ye shall listen to the truth, all of ye!" cried Mary resolutely. Claspings and unclaspings her lit-



tle hands with nervous intensity, her eyes filled with determined purpose, she faced the fickle crowd that was regarding her with such open admiration for her stanchness, her bravery. "I heard her ladyship swear to ruin Robert because he spurned her unwomanly offers of love," she declared, with convincing earnestness.

A guilty flush reddened the creamy pallor of her ladyship's face. "Oh, the shame of it, my lord, to be thus humiliated before my guests!" she cried, bursting into nervous tears. "Surely, my lord, you would not listen to such monstrous tales," she pleaded.

"Oh, believe me, I speak the truth," exclaimed Mary, a great fear in her heart as she saw the tender look Lord Glencairn bestowed upon his weeping wife.

He was torn and spent by conflicting emotions. He did not doubt his wife, yet the words of the young girl rang true, and there was only truth and nobility stamped upon the gloomy face of the poet. What was he to believe? How could he decide? His confidence in his wife had never yet been shaken—yet, stay—there was once when—but he would not think of that time, it was so long ago, yet think of it he did with uneasy misgivings. If she had deceived him once, might she not again? he asked himself fearfully.

"Mr. Burns, will you assure me on your word of



honor as a man that you are entirely innocent of any intentional insult to Lady Glencairn?" asked Mr. Mackenzie bluntly. He had taken his place beside Robert, along with Mrs. Dunlop and Mary and Eppy McKay, together with a few more of Robert's sympathizers and stanch believers in his innocence. And now he asked the question in hope of eliciting some explanation, some excuse, anything, from the silent man.

Robert raised his head and without looking at any one particular person, answered simply, indifferently, as many thought.

"I have always held Lady Glencairn in the highest respect and admiration," he said quietly. "She alone knows what is the end she aims at, by attributing feelings to me with regard to her which I have never conceived, and words which I have never uttered." And he sank once more into his listless attitude.

Lord Glencairn passed his hand over his brow in a bewildered manner. "You were ever truthful, Robert," he muttered so low that none but his wife heard his implied doubt of her.

She turned on him witheringly. "My lord, you insult me by lending an ear to aught he or his witness can say in his behalf," she exclaimed frigidly. Then, turning to the onlookers, she continued with insolent innuendo in words and manner, "You all know the infatuated attachment of this maid for Mr.



Burns, who has bewitched her until she is ready to sacrifice every consideration of truth, reason, or duty to shield her guilty lover."

"What a scandal this will cause throughout Edinburgh," whispered Eppy to Mrs. Dunlop, who was almost beside herself with speechless indignation by this time. She had been listening with growing anger to Lady Glencairn's insolent falsehoods, for she knew they were falsehoods, and she would never believe that Robbie would belittle himself by lying, for he was too brutally frank and truthful at times to be thoroughly an agreeable companion.

Eppy's inopportune remark was the straw that broke the camel's back, and she turned on her hotly. "Hold your tongue, ye old busy body!" she exploded violently, nearly knocking the astonished Eppy down by the suddenness, the unexpectedness, of the retort.

"I was never so insulted in my life," Eppy gasped tearfully, making little dabs at her eyes with a dainty 'kerchief, and casting hurt, reproachful glances at the blunt old lady, who, after delivering her shaft at the unoffending Eppy, turned to Lord Glencairn, the fire still flashing in her determined eyes.

"Lord Glencairn," she said, with a touch of defiance, "you may forbid me your house hereafter, and indeed I hardly believe I will be welcome," with a look at the scornful face of her hostess; "but I



care not; I believe in Robert's innocence, and that Mary Campbell has only spoken the truth." A few nodded their heads to each other in approval. Lord Glencairn stood mute, a prey to the doubting fear which gripped his heart.

Her ladyship, with one quick look around at the wavering faces of her friends, knew that she was losing ground, and the color faded from her cheeks. A look of nervous fear came into her steely eyes. She must restore their shaking confidence in her—but how? It gave her a strange feeling of satisfaction to know that whatever the outcome, she had ruined his popularity for the present, but she wanted to ruin him utterly—to turn every door in Edinburgh against him. If she could only get someone to speak in her behalf, she thought prayerfully, as she looked about her. Suddenly her eyes rested on the saturnine features of her uncle, who was regarding her with a malicious smile of triumph. An eager light came into her hard eyes. He hated Robert Burns; he would help her out if anyone would; she would risk it. His word coupled with hers would instantly turn the tide in her favor. And risking all upon the throw, she called out loud enough to be heard above the murmur of voices, "Uncle, it seems my word is not fully believed," she said, with a little pitying, disdainful smile, which brought the flush of embarrassment to the cheeks of several, who happened to catch her eye; "so if you will oblige me



by relating what you know of the unpleasant circumstances, perhaps your word will be accepted by our doubting friends." Her lazy voice was replete with insulting sarcasm.

All eyes turned to look at Sir William, who, after one quick, angry glance at the cool, smiling face of his strategic niece, cleared his throat with irritating precision, and, without glancing at the startled face of his victim, who had started to his feet upon hearing the amazing request of her ladyship, spoke quickly and harshly, a faint tinge of color dying his yellow skin as the dastardly lie left his lips.

"I overheard Mr. Burns' insults to my niece," he said firmly. "I was standing behind the curtain there," pointing to a large window, "where I had gone only a moment before Lady Glencairn entered the room, to glance out of the window, having heard a noise without, and before I could make my presence known, Mr. Burns had thrown himself upon his knees, and—and I did not disturb them," he concluded lamely.

"Ye perjurer!" cried Robert furiously. "By heaven, I could choke ye with your own lie!" and he turned white with passion. Sir William cowered back, a look of fear in his shifty eyes.

"Oh, Robbie, take me hame, take me hame," gasped Mary, with heart-breaking pathos, and she sank half fainting in the chair Robert had vacated.

"Come, James, let us retire," said Lady Glen-



cairn sweetly, casting a look of grateful triumph at her uncle. "I am sorry you have lost a friend, but I could not shield him," and she pressed his arm with affected tenderness. Slowly, sorrowfully he allowed himself to be drawn to the door.

"My lord!" cried Robert hoarsely, "have ye no word to say to me? Ye have heard the proofs of my innocence; will ye not believe them?" and his whole soul was in his eyes as he eagerly searched the downcast face of his old benefactor.

Lord Glencairn gave him one sad, reproachful look. "Oh, Robert," he said brokenly, "and I trusted you so."

Robert dropped his hand, which he had extended pleadingly, and a flush mounted to the roots of his hair, which quickly faded, leaving him paler than before, while a look of wounded pride and unutterable bitterness flashed into his stern face.

"I will attempt no further denial, my lord," he said slowly, with quiet dignity. "Calumny has at last reared its vicious head to strike like some venomous serpent, seeking to crush me in its enveloping folds. The genius of the Bard is ignored, forgotten—only my obscure birth, my sins, my indiscretions, my faults are remembered now," and he smiled with mournful bitterness.

"Ye have been too puffed up with pride and vanity," cried Sir William brutally. "Edinburgh has tired of you."



Robert gave a scornful little laugh. "Why," he asked, looking around at those who had been only too glad to fawn upon him a few moments before, "because I am no longer a curiosity for the vulgar to gaze at?" He spoke with biting sarcasm. He paused a minute, then continued bitterly. "Oh, fool that I have been! At last my eyes are opened to my true position in your world of society. How I hate and despise the hypocrisy of you so-called somebodies! How you fawn and smirk and bow down to wealth and position, while the man of genius, of avowed worth is disbelieved, dishonored, and insulted! God, the humiliation of it all!" His eyes flashed with righteous anger and the indignant scorn in his voice cut deeply through the thin skin of more than one of his listeners. "I have endured the insults heaped upon my head to-day in bitterness of spirit and in silent scorn," he continued stormily, "but now my outraged manhood at last rebels, and I throw down my gage of contemptuous defiance."

"Robert, calm yourself, laddie!" whispered Mrs. Dunlop apprehensively, laying a restraining hand upon his arm, which trembled with excitement.

"Your friends will never believe aught against you, Mr. Burns," exclaimed Mr. Mackenzie, with deep feeling in his voice.

"My friends!" repeated Robert wildly. "I have none, I want none in this purse proud city. No longer will I submit to insulting condescension. No



longer will I skulk into a corner of the street like the veriest nobody on earth, lest the rattling equipage of some gossiping titled blockhead mangle me in the mire."

"Robert, I have always loved you," exclaimed Lord Glencairn, with rebuking reproachfulness.

"But ye believe the worst of me noo," replied Robert passionately. "It only needed this scene of scandal to show my friends in their true colors."

"Then go back to your low-born friends where ye belong," snarled Sir William vindictively.

"I mean to go back," retorted Robert, his face flushing crimson, "and with gladness will I shake the dust of this unjust city off my feet." A softer look came over his haggard face and his eyes filled with a yearning look of utter heart-weariness, a sudden longing for the blissful quiet of his country home. A tender sweetness came into his voice as he continued softly, "I will return from whence I came, to the plowtail, where the poetic genius of my country found me and threw her inspiring mantle over me."

Mary took his hand in hers, and with infinite tenderness murmured fondly, "An' ye'll find the banks an' braes of bonnie Doon holding out their arms to welcome ye back to your native heath once more, laddie."

"Let us hope he'll shine to better advantage



there," sneered Sir William. A nervous little titter broke the tense silence.

Robert turned on him, goaded to sudden fury. "Ye bird o' ill omen!" he panted hoarsely, "I have never injured ye; I have brought money into your empty pockets. But ye will repent bitterly for swearing away my life as ye have this day, for e'en though I leave Edinburgh in shame and disgrace, 'tis not for ay. Nay! I thank God my works will live after me, that my name will yet become immortal." His words rang out wildly and with impassioned intensity.

Lady Glencairn laughed mockingly, and, turning to some of her friends standing near, she made some low-toned remark, evidently a sarcastic witticism at the expense of the speaker, which elicited a burst of hollow laughter from her listeners, who, while they wished to remain in the favor of the leader of Edinburgh society, stood in wholesome awe of the blunt speech, the scornful wit of the brilliant poet on trial before them.

"Ye vain boaster!" scoffed Sir William loudly, "you'll be forgot within a week," and he laughed derisively.

"Ye may scoff, ye may laugh," retorted Robert hotly. "Ye may call me egoist if ye like, but I know what I have done for my country—I have attuned my wild artless notes to sing her praises, joys, and sorrows, and I know those songs will live forever in



the heart of every true Scotsman." Suddenly, like a ray of sunshine which dispels the morning mist, his dark haughty face took upon itself a noble, thoughtful, rapt expression—his wildly flashing eyes softened—his furrowed brow smoothed, and, fixing his luminous eyes upon the disdainful face of his hostess, he continued with melancholy pathos and prophetic solemnity, "Ah, my lady, ye have trampled my good name low in the dust to-day, but my prophetic spirit tells me the day is coming, even though ye an' all my traducers here be dead, rotted and forgot, when one name will be remembered, cherished and proclaimed above all others of Scotland, aye, the world, and that name, my lords and ladies, will not be of any rich titled somebody! Nay, 'twill be that of the plowman-poet of Ayrshire, Robert Burns."



## CHAPTER XIX

THE situation in which Robert now found himself was calculated to awaken reflection. The time had come, so he gloomily told his friend, Will Nichol, the morning after the garden party at Lord Glencairn's, for him to abandon the gayety and dissipation of which he had been too much enamored; and all that day he pondered seriously, if gloomily, on the past, and formed virtuous resolutions respecting the future. He had weeks ago made up his mind to settle himself for life in the occupation of agriculture, and now that Edinburgh had tired of his peculiarities, and the novelty of his appearance had become an old story for them, there was nothing left for him to do but to start in on his new life as soon as possible. To further that end he called upon Sir William that day and demanded a settlement. When he left the office he found himself master of nearly £500. With the money in his pocket he again called on Will Nichols and requested him to assist him in the selection of a farm. With his advice and assistance he soon decided to lease the farm of Ellisland, on the banks of the River Nith, just above Dumfries. When he had in this manner arranged his plans for the future his generous heart,



which was sore and bleeding from the many wounds it had recently received, wounds which seemed to the suffering man that would never heal in this life, turned in pity and remorse to the mother of his child—a thrill of yearning stirred him strangely as he thought of the little one—his son—a warm feeling of love welled up in his heart as he softly repeated the words; and listening to no consideration but those of honor and duty, and a strange feeling of growing affection, which made him pause in wonder, he sought out Jean at the Inn, having learned that she was still in town, contrary to Lady Glencairn's assertion, which he had believed; and there, with his friends surrounding them, they were joined in a public declaration of marriage, thus legalizing their union and rendering it permanent for life.

Mrs. Dunlop and Mary had not been present at the ceremony. Mary was confined to her bed in a state of nervous collapse, and Mrs. Dunlop, much as she loved Robert, and honored him for the noble step he was taking, could not leave the stricken girl. It was her wish and determination to keep Mary with her as long as she could content herself there. Her kind, motherly heart ached in silent sympathy for the child who had received such a bitter disappointment, and who was bearing her sorrows with such patient fortitude. Before Robert left the city she wrote for him to come and see her, assuring him of her continued friendship, etc., etc. That evening



found him seated beside his stanch friend in whom he confided his hopes and his fears for the future, and soon he had poured out the bitterness of his heart, the yearnings of his soul, all the cruel disappointments of his tempestuous life. She listened in sympathetic silence, a smile of encouragement, every now and then, lighting up her face. When he had finished, she told him how proud she was of him, how she gloried in his strength of purpose, his new-made resolutions, cautioned him not to forget the new vows he had so lately formed, warned him of the many vices, the back-sliding state into which one of his temperament was so apt to fall. Then with infinite tenderness she told him of the courage of the sweet maiden who now lay upon her bed of sorrow in the upper room, told him of her loyalty, her pride in his greatness, in his nobility, while he listened with the burning tears streaming unchecked down his quivering cheeks. After a pause she took him by the hand and led him softly to the door of Mary's chamber. "For the last farewell," she whispered sadly. Then she left him standing before the door, gazing at it as though it were the gates of Heaven which were about to open for him at his bidding. A sweet voice bade him enter, in answer to his timid knock, and softly opening the door, he stepped into the room.

Mary opened her beautiful, tired blue eyes, thinking it was her dear benefactress, and then what a



divine rapture—what a dazzling wonder and joy flashed into them, giving them back their old luster of sunlight sparkling on an azure sea. She sprang up in her bed and stretched out her arms.

“Robert!” she cried sobbingly. “Oh, Robbie, my darling.”

Mrs. Dunlop came back and softly closed the door on the sacred stillness that followed. Then she slowly wended her way down to her sitting-room and sat down with a deep sigh. “What a sad old world this is,” she thought. The time dragged along very slowly as she patiently waited for Robert to come down. Presently she heard the door above close ever so gently, and then his low footfall down the thick stair carpet. She rose and met him in the reception hall. He stood on the lowest step, his hand on the balustrade, his breast heaving with the strain of his emotions. Mrs. Dunlop took his hand tenderly and pressed it in loving sympathy.

By and by he spoke, and the intense suffering in his voice touched her keenly. “As ye sow, so shall ye reap,” he muttered brokenly. She could only press his hand in silent sympathy. Gradually his grief became quiet and a look of melancholy resignation came over his expressive face.

“When will you leave the city?” she asked quietly.

He thought a moment. “My affairs will be settled by the week’s end,” he replied, “then I shall go

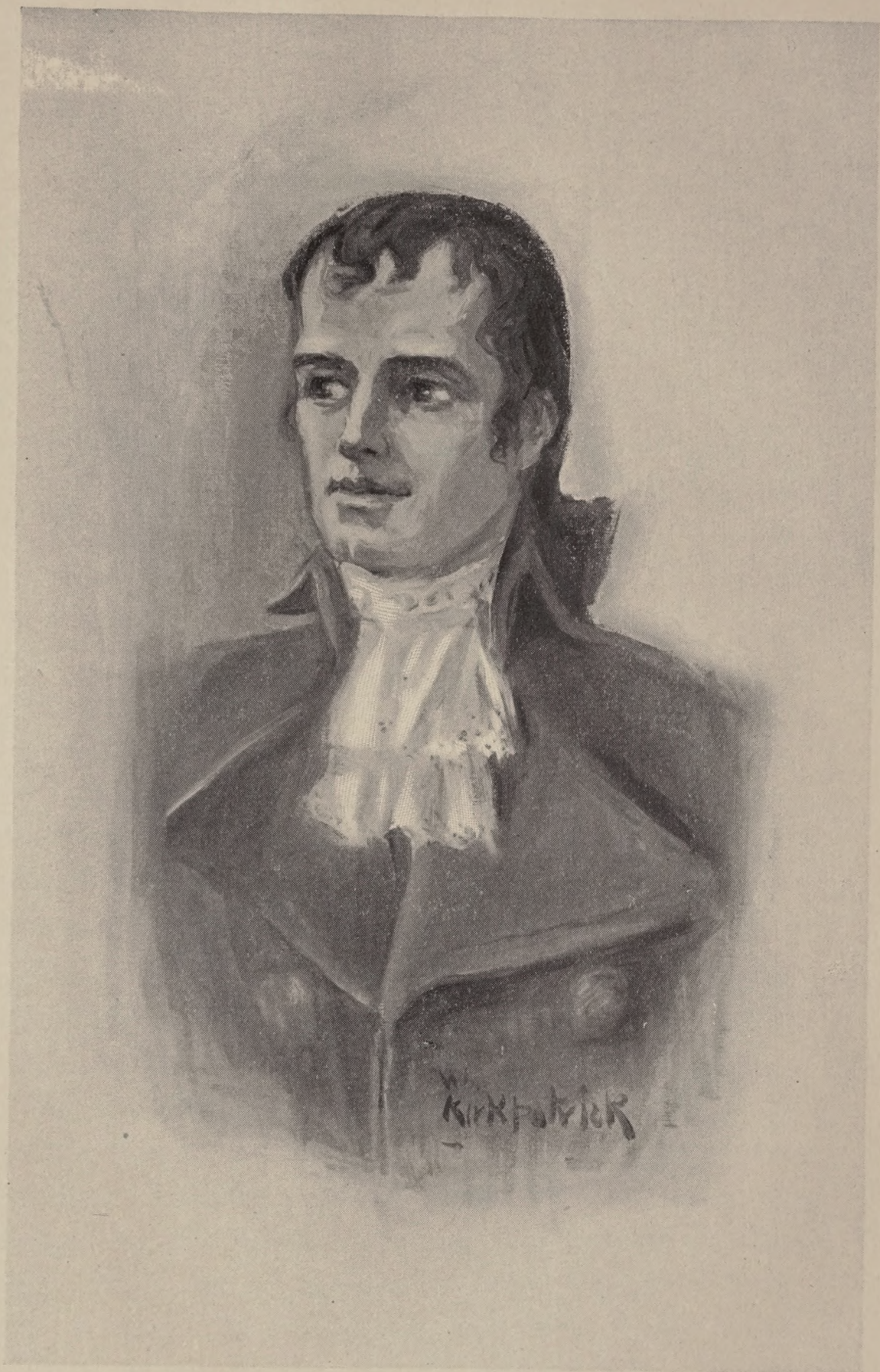


straight to Ellisland. I——” He paused a moment, then straightened himself, and continued in a firm voice, “Jean has gone to Mauchline. She will remain there until the house at Ellisland is in condition to receive her.” He held out his hand. “And now, dear, good friend, good-by.”

“No, not good-by, laddie,” she answered tearfully. “Just *au revoir*, for I mean to visit you some day,” and she smiled through her tears.

With a last shake of the hand, he left her, while above stairs a sweet, wan, tear-stained face, pressed close against the pane, watched his bowed figure striding moodily toward his lodging, watched it as it faded, growing dimmer and dimmer, till it was lost to sight.





Robert Burns







## BOOK III

### CHAPTER XX

Now spells of mightier power prepare,  
Bid brighter phantoms round him dance;  
Let flattery spread her viewless snare,  
And fame attract his vagrant glance;  
Let sprightly pleasure too advance,  
Unveiled her eyes, unclasped her zone;  
Till last in love's delicious trance  
He scorns the joys his youth has known.

WHEN Robert reached Ellisland the evening sun was flaming over the distant western hills. Not a breath stirred the crimson opening blossom, or the verdant spreading leaf. It was a golden moment for a poet's heart. He stopped his horse by the door of the cottage and stood silently regarding his future home. He had secured from Mr. Miller in Dumfries, the owner of the farm, the keys, and declining the company of several, who offered to show him the way to his new possession, he set out on his journey in gloomy solitude. For a few moments he listened to the birds pouring their harmony on every hand, as if to welcome the wanderer, then with a sigh he unlocked the door and went within. A few weeks passed uneventfully. Upon



his arrival he had immediately begun to rebuild the dwelling house, which was inadequate to accommodate his family. It afforded his jaded senses much pleasure to survey the grounds he was about to cultivate, and in rearing a building that should give shelter to his wife and children (who were with Squire Armour in Mauchline, the stern old man having relented upon a bed of sickness), and, as he fondly hoped, to his own gray hairs; sentiments of independence buoyed up his mind; pictures of domestic content and peace rose in his imagination; and a few weeks passed away, the most tranquil, if not the happiest, which he had experienced for some time. His fame naturally drew upon him the attention of his neighbors in the district in which he lived, and he was received at the table of the gentlemen of Nithdale with welcome, with kindness and respect. It is to be lamented that at this critical period of his life he was without the restraining influences of the society of his wife, for a great change had taken place in his situation; his old habits were broken, and he brooded in melancholy abstraction upon his past glories in Edinburgh and his wrongs, while thoughts of Highland Mary constantly filled his waking hours, and caused him to forget the good resolutions he had formed, in his desire to drown recollections. The social parties to which he was invited too often seduced him from his rustic labor and his plain rustic food, and overthrew the unsteady



fabric of his resolutions, inflaming those propensities which temperance might have weakened, and prudence finally suppressed. It was not long, therefore, before Robert began to view his farm with dislike and despondence, if not with disgust. Before his advent into Edinburgh society, and during his sojourn there, he had refrained from the habitual use of strong liquors. But in Dumfries the sins that so easily beset him continually presented themselves, and though he clearly foresaw the consequences of yielding to them, his appetite and sensations, which could not prevent the dictates of his judgment, finally triumphed over the power of his will.

His great celebrity made him an object of interest and curiosity to strangers, and few persons of cultivated minds passed through Dumfries without attempting to see the poet, and to enjoy the pleasure of his conversation. As he could not receive them under his own humble roof these interviews passed at the inns of the towns, and often terminated in excesses, which Robert was seldom able to resist. Indeed, there were never wanting persons to share his social pleasures, to lead or accompany him to the tavern, to partake in the wildest sallies of his wit, or to witness the strength and degradation of his genius.

Unfortunately he had for several years looked to an office in the excise as a certain means of livelihood, should his other expectations fail. He had been recommended to the Board of Excise before leaving



Mossgiel, and had received the instructions necessary for such a situation. He now applied to be employed regularly, and was immediately appointed exciseman, or gauger, as it is vulgarly called, of the district in which he lived. His farm was after this, in a great measure, abandoned to servants, while he betook himself to the duties of his new appointment. To be sure he could still be seen at intervals directing his plow, a labor in which he excelled, but it was not at Ellisland that he was now in general to be found. Mounted on horseback, our hero was pursuing the defaulters of the revenue among the hills and vales of Nithdale, his roving eye wandering over the charms of nature, and muttering his wayward fancies as he moved along. Though by nature of an athletic form, Robert had in his constitution the peculiarities and delicacies that belong to the temperament of genius. Endowed by nature with great sensibility of nerves, he was in his corporeal, as well as in his mental system, liable to inordinate impressions, to fever of the body, as well as of mind. This predisposition to disease, which strict temperance in diet, regular exercise, and sound sleep might have subdued, habits of a very different nature, strengthened and inflamed.

The following year Jean and her bairns came to live at Ellisland. He received them with quiet affection, and Jean, who had grown strangely humbled and passive, did her utmost to please him at all



times, never referring to the past, and tactfully avoiding all irritating subjects, and by her soothing presence, her loving words of comfort and sympathy, soon made her presence indispensable to her moody husband. Another year passed by, a year of anxiety for Jean, who was compelled to witness her husband's lapses from sobriety, which now came so often, and to watch his health decline slowly, but surely, in consequence. In the midst of all his wanderings Robert met nothing in his domestic circle but gentleness and forgiveness, except the gnawings of his own remorse. He acknowledged his transgressions to his patient wife, promised amendment, and again received pardon for his offenses. But as the strength of his body decayed, his resolution became feebler, and habit acquired predominating strength.

All this time Robert had entertained hopes of promotion in the exercise, but circumstances occurred which retarded their fulfillment, and which in his own mind destroyed all expectation of their ever being fulfilled. His steady friend, Mr. Mackenzie, interposed his good offices in his behalf, however, and he was suffered to retain his situation, but given to understand that his promotion was deferred, and must depend on his future behavior. This circumstance made a deep impression on Robert. He fancied that everyone held him in contemptuous pity, as a man of some genius who had dwindled into a paltry exciseman, and who was slinking out the rest



of his insignificant existence in the meanest of pursuits, and among the lowest of mankind; and for days he would sit quietly on the banks of the river plunged in the gloomiest meditation.

About this time he received word of Lord Glencairn's death. The news plunged him into another fit of melancholy gloom, lessened somewhat, however, by the assurance that his noble benefactor had died knowing the truth, believing in Robert's innocence, and asking his forgiveness.

As his health declined his thoughts became more and more fixed upon Mary, who was once more in Mossiel at Colonel Montgomery's. He yearned with bitter longing to gaze upon her sweet face again, to hear her dear voice speak his name. These thoughts he strove vainly to conquer, to banish from his mind, for Jean's patience and goodness, her loving forbearance, filled him with shame at his own unworthiness. But she gave no sign of the bitter heartache she endured. She accepted it all in patient resignation, striving by uniform prudence and good management to relieve his distress of mind regarding the material welfare of his little flock.

Toward the end of spring he contracted a severe cold while in reckless pursuit of an offender, in a driving rain storm, and, having caught the guilty one, he celebrated the event at the inn, in company with some congenial spirits, seated in his wet clothes, the result being an attack of rheumatism, which laid



him upon a bed of sickness for some weeks. His salary was but a small one, hardly sufficient to keep his family from want, and though hitherto his farm had yielded him a comfortable living, for some months it had been left to run itself, with the inevitable results. Planting time had come and gone, and still his ground lay all untouched. His laborers had refused to work for him longer without pay, and Souter Johnny, who was now making his home at Ellisland, could only attend to the lighter chores about the farm. And now things began to take a serious outlook for our hero and his family. Though sick and discouraged, with want staring him in the face, he still sent glowing reports of his continued prosperity to his loved ones in Mossgiel, reports that filled their anxious hearts with false hopes and prayerful thankfulness.



## CHAPTER XXI

ONE day during Robert's early convalescence, Souter, after having finished his chores, sauntered leisurely through the vegetable garden. It was a peaceful nook, and there were household odors of mint, and thyme, and boy's love, which were pleasant to the soul of Souter Johnny, and reminded him of stewed rabbit, which he dearly loved, with all its attendant delicacies. He paced the path slowly, the light of the sinking sun blazing gloriously upon the brilliant gown of his companion, who was simpering along beside him, her little gray eyes looking down on him with flattering interest as she listened with apparent delight to his tales of daring adventure. Finally their conversation drifted to the sick man within.

"Poor bonnie laddie," sighed Eppy dolefully. "To think of him being so ill. We all loved him dearly in Edinburgh."

"He hasna' been the same lad since he returned from there," replied Souter. "He had many great disappointments in his young life, I tell ye," and he shook his head dismally. "An' noo everything has gone to the dogs wi' him, ever since he has been in Ellisland. 'Twas a sorry day when he became an



exciseman, say I." He paused a moment reflectively, then continued earnestly, "But no matter what anybody says different, he has always done his duty faithfully, always on the tramp in all kinds of weather, till at last his robust constitution has given out, an' he bowled over, so to speak." He loyally refrained from mentioning that Robert's illness was partly due to his imprudent way of living.

Eppy sighed again. "And he the Bard of Scotland," she returned commiseratingly. "How I pity him. Isn't it sad Mr. MacDougall?"

"Aye," replied Souter, with a quick look from under his shaggy eyebrows. "Ye hae a kind heart in ye, Miss McKay," he observed after a pause.

"Do you really think so?" she simpered. "I fear you are a base flatterer, Mr. MacDougall. In Edinburgh there were so many who flattered me, who sought for my favors, that I became wearied of it all, and longed for a change. That is why I came here to Ayrshire and purchased the farm adjoining, that I might rest during the summer."

"And then ye'll be leaving us?" asked Souter with a deep sigh.

"Perhaps not," and she looked at him coquettishly. "Would anyone care if I did return to town?" she insinuated slyly.

"'Tis a wonder that such a bonnie lassie as ye should still be a maiden," he observed abruptly with a sly look out of the corner of his eye.



"Oh, I have had many offers," she answered airily, though her heart fluttered with a newly-born hope.

"Do ye ne'er get lonely, Miss McKay?"

She sighed and cast down her eyes. "Yes, I do," she declared plaintively, "and I'm lonely now in that great big house with only a servant for company."

"Souter Johnny," said Souter to himself, "this is the chance of your lifetime; go in and win a home." Having arrived at this resolution, he cleared his throat and pausing in his walk, faced the simpering old lady. "Mum, ye see before ye," he remarked, not without some nervousness, "a single man, like yoursel'. Not from necessity, och nae; Souter Johnny, before he lost his handsome looks, could hae had his pick o' any o' the lassies, but I hae waited till noo——" he paused impressively.

"Till now, Mr. MacDougall?" she repeated breathlessly, eager to have him continue.

"Weel, noo I hae found her," he answered, "an' she's what I hae been lookin' for a' my life."

"How romantic you are," she cried soulfully, with an admiring look.

"Aye, that I am, 'tis born in me," he responded. "Do ye mind if I smoke, mum?" he asked carelessly. He took out of his waistcoat pocket his old black pipe and held it in his hand.

"Oh, no," she gushed. "I love to see you smoke, 'tis so manly."



Having lighted his pipe and got it drawing to his satisfaction, he turned to her once more, and remarked casually, "Would ye call me too old to get married? I'm askin' your advice noo." He looked at her quizzically.

She shook her head vigorously in the negative. "Age does not matter at all," she observed sagely. "The question is do you feel peart?" and she regarded him with anxious eyes.

A grim smile played around Souter's lips. Removing his pipe, he replied with convincing firmness, "Never was sick in my life, strong and healthy. Feel my muscle!" and he held out his doubled arm to the timid Eppy, who shrank away bashfully. "It willna' hurt ye," he declared. Thus encouraged, she gingerly touched it with one finger. "Fine, isn't it?" he asked proudly. Before she could answer he continued, "I have a fine appetite, mum, an' I dinna' feel my age. Noo I ask ye, am I too ugly to be looked at, mum? Dinna' be afraid to tell me the truth." He held up his head, straightened his bent shoulders and stood awaiting her reply.

She eyed him a moment in silence. "Well, Mr. MacDougall," she said doubtfully, after a pause, "I must confess you're no beauty." A look of disappointment came over Souter's face, seeing which she hastened to reassure him. "But I care not for looks, Mr. MacDougall," she cried earnestly. "One could get used to you. I've heard it said that one



can get used to anything in time," and she smiled sweetly into his downcast face.

He gave her a quick look.

"Is it as bad as that?" he returned reflectively. "Weel, looks is all a matter of taste. And noo let's get down to business." Eppy gave a start and her hands fluttered about nervously, as she waited for his next words. "Do ye think, mum, this sweet, lovely lassie I hae in my mind would hae me for a husband?" he insinuated softly.

She gave a little gasp. "This is so sudden," she simpered, then broke off abruptly—he hadn't asked her yet. "Er—why don't you ask the beautiful lassie. She might think of it." She coyly looked down upon him from under her big bonnet.

Souter threw down his pipe in his earnestness. "I will," he ejaculated quickly, his eyes sparkling with triumph. "'Tis your ain bright sel' for whom my heart is yearnin'. Will ye hae me, Eppy?"

Eppy closed her eyes in blissful content. "My first proposal," she thought joyfully. Opening her eyes, she gazed at him fondly. "Oh, I don't want to make a mistake now," she cried, half frightened, but she had no intention of refusing him, however.

"Dinna' fear," replied Souter eagerly. "I'll attend to that; there'll be no mistake made, I'll warrant ye."

"You're such a masterful man," she exclaimed, with an admiring look, "and—well, there's no



gainsaying you. I must confess a real live man about the house would be most comforting—to my sister, Sibella—and—and me, so I—I'll have you, Souter," and she threw herself into his arms with a cry of joy and thankfulness.

"Thank ye, thank ye, mum," said Souter gratefully. "I feel as if I had won the prize ticket in a grand lottery." He heaved a great sigh of blissful content as he thought of the big house across the way. "There noo, my pipe is out again," he observed, after a little pause, and he calmly turned his back and proceeded to relight it, leaving Eppy regarding him with reproachful eyes and pouting lips.

"Souter," she finally faltered, "I—I thought you were more romantic. We haven't sealed our engagement by a—a——"

"A—what?" asked Souter concernedly. "Is there something mair to do?"

She sidled up to him, giggling bashfully, and after turning to see if they were observed, she put her arm around his neck and said pensively:

"Gin a body meet a body comin' thro' the rye,  
Gin a body kiss a body, need a body cry."

A comical look of comprehension dawned on Souter's face. "O—oh! I see, 'tis a kiss ye mean," he answered lightly. "Weel, noo, I'll na' stop ye



if ye want to kiss me. If you can stand it, I can," and he held his face up to hers, for she towered a foot above him. With a sudden dart, a downward sweep of her head, she glued her lips to the little man's, then with a resounding smack she released him, with a sigh of absolute content upon her homely face. "Weel, noo, that's not half bad," observed Souter, smacking his lips reflectively.

"Now, Souter," declared Eppy decidedly, after they had walked a few paces in quiet, "since you are a Highlander, you must wear the kilt, to please me; and it must be the tartan of our clan."

Souter threw up his hands in amazed horror. "Oh, dearie, dinna' ask me to do that; I canna' wear the kilt; I am na' built that way," and he looked down at his legs with whimsical seriousness.

"Then I'll not marry you," she declared with apparent firmness.

Souter hurriedly explained in trembling fear. "I'll tell ye the truth, dearie: when I last wore the kilt the laddies laughed at my crooked legs an' called me a scarecrow, an' I swore then I'd ne'er show my bare legs to mortal man again. Would ye hae me expose my miserable defects, womman?"

She stood off and let her eyes rove slowly down his nether extremities with the air of a connoisseur. "I protest they do not look so badly," she observed encouragingly.

"Looks are deceivin', lassie," quickly replied





“ ‘Keep on turning,’ she commanded.”







Souter, who objected seriously to kilts. "My legs are na' my beauty point, for a' that; they are just twa wee bones, I tell ye, so be prepared for the worst," and he shook his head dolefully.

"Oh, well, as Mr. Burns says, 'A man's a man, for a' that!'" she replied sweetly. Then after a moment's reflection, she asked with tender solicitude, "Are they so very wee, Souter?"

"Aye, ye should see them," he replied eagerly, hoping to convince her as to his unfitness to wear the dress.

Eppy held up her hands before her face in horror. "Whatever are you saying, Souter?"

"Weel, my legs are a maist sensitive subject wi' me, my dear," he returned apologetically.

"Turn around," she commanded. He did so in wonder. "Keep on turning," she commanded. "I think, mayhap, they're not so bad," she observed after a critical inspection. "However, after we are wed I can decide better whether ye can wear the kilt or not."

Souter regarded her in meek astonishment, then he humbly rejoined, "Weel, if ye can stand their looks, I'll na' complain, but it's o'er chilly at times," and he shivered apprehensively.

She laughed gayly. "Now, Souter, I must go home. Come over soon, you masterful man!"

"Aye, the first thing in the morning," retorted Souter calmly, "an' I'll bring the minister wi' me."



"The minister! Why bring him?" asked Eppy in amazement.

"To marry us, my dear," replied Souter quietly.

"You must be daft man!" she cried in sudden alarm.

Souter shook his head. "Ye'd better take no chances," he retorted calmly. "I may change my mind," and he carefully knocked the ashes out of his pipe and put it in his pocket.

"You impatient man!" fluttered Eppy. "I—I—come over and we'll talk about it. Good-by, laddie," and she tripped daintily off down the path toward the gate.

Then Souter sat down on the seat under the big tree beside the house. "Souter Johnny," he said to himself, "ye're a devil with the wimmen, mon," and a smile of self-satisfaction stole over his wrinkled face.

"Souter Johnny!" panted Eppy, running back to him breathlessly, "I've changed my mind."

Souter jumped to his feet in sudden terror. Had he lost her after all, or rather, had he lost the home across the way? "W—what, do you mean?" he stammered.

"I mean—you—you—may bring the minister," she gasped, and away she fluttered down the walk before he could recover from his astonishment.

"Hurrah! your fortune is made, Souter Johnny!" he cried aloud, when the meaning of her words had



dawned upon him, and he threw his bonnet high in the air. "Ye'll nae hae to cobble shoes any mair, noo, for ye'll be lord of the manor house, wi' servants to wait on ye. Oh, the power of money! ye'll ride out in your fine carriage, Souter, and as ye drive by, all the neighbors will be bowing and scraping to ye. I can see them noo. 'Twill be 'Mr. MacDougall, will ye do us the honor to call at the castle; her ladyship would be pleased to see you.' Then I'll say to them that snubbed me when I was poor, 'Weel, noo, 'tis very busy I am, attending to my estates and other social duties. Tell her grace that Mr. and Mrs. MacDougall will be pleased to have her visit us at MacDougall House, if she cares to meet us.'"

And he stalked along majestically to the house with his head held proudly erect. "Noo, I'll find the minister and make sure of my bird." Arriving at the door of the cottage, he stopped, and addressing an imaginary butler, said pompously, "James, open the door, your master wishes to enter! Thank ye! Noo take my hat! Noo ye may go!" With a chuckle of delight he quietly opened the door and composing his features into their natural expression, entered the cottage and made his way to the kitchen, where he found a bowl of porridge awaiting him, which he hungrily devoured.

Meanwhile in the other room Robert lay tossing feverishly upon his bed. Jean sat beside him smoothing his pillow from time to time, and sooth-



ing his anguished mind with words of love and encouragement.

“ Blessings on your faithful head, Jean,” he murmured gratefully. “ You’re the best, truest wife that erring mortal man ever had.” She flushed with pleasure at his words of praise. “ Oh, this accursed rheumatism,” he groaned. “ How it shackles one, making one as much a prisoner as though a ball and chain were attached to his ankle.”

“ But you are much better to-day,” said Jean brightly.

“ For a while only. I fear me this is my fatal illness,” he replied despondently.

“ Don’t say that, Robert; you’ll be on your feet in a few days now,” and she looked hopefully into his worn and haggard face.

He pressed her hand gently. “ I haven’t been the best of husbands, lass,” he said after a pause. “ I have sore tried your patience and your love ofttimes, by my unfaithfulness, my unworthiness.”

“ I do not complain, Robert,” she answered quietly.

“ No, ye have never done that,” he said with a tender smile, “ frequent though my lapses in sobriety and propriety have been.” He paused thoughtfully; presently he continued in mournful reflection, “ But I was punished for those sins afterward, for then came remorse, shame, regret, the three hell hounds that ever dog my steps and bay at my heels.”



"If it is God's will——" began Jean, but he interrupted her.

"Ah, no, Jean," he replied bitterly. "'Tis not God's will that I should be here, racked with pain and tortured by the sins that come staring me in the face, each one telling a more bitter tale than his fellow. 'Tis only the result of my own headstrong folly." She wiped away the drops of perspiration from his brow with tender fingers, while he lay panting from the excitement that the recital of his sorrows had occasioned.

"There, do not distress yourself with such bitter thoughts," she told him gently. "What is done, is done, and all our sins will be blotted out in that other life."

"That other life," he repeated dreamily. "Can it be possible that when I resign this feverish being I shall find myself in conscious existence, enjoying and enjoyed? Would to God I as firmly believed it as I ardently wish it. If there is another life," he continued with a flash of his old whimsical brightness, "it must be for the just, the benevolent, the amiable only, and the good. I'm sore afraid Rob Burns will na' be able to get even a peep through the Pearly Gates."

"Hush, dear," replied Jean with tender reproach. "'Twill be open to all. 'Let whosoever will, come and have eternal life,' the Master said."

He mused a while on that sweet thought. "Ah, weel, just noo," he returned with a sigh, "this life



is what we must face, and which I must cling to as long as I can for the sake of my little flock. Poverty and misfortune must be overcome, and at once. Our salvation now lies in my getting the supervisorship and increased salary; then we need have no fear of the future; we can laugh at fate."

"You sent your last poem, 'Prettiest maid on Devon's bank,' to Mr. Thompson, didn't ye, laddie?" asked Jean anxiously.

"Aye," he replied, closing his eyes wearily. "And I implored him for God's sake to send me a few pounds to tide me over the present, till I got my promotion. I am not asking a loan, 'tis a business transaction," he continued proudly, "and I ken he will send whatever he is able to spare. He is a good friend, and it grieves me bitterly to be obliged to ask help of him to keep us from starving. But," and a note of independence crept into his voice, "my song is worth whatever he sends."

"Hunger and want can humble the most independent spirit," returned Jean sadly. She rose and walked to the window and looked out into the twilight with searching, anxious eyes. "Posty should bring us an answer to-night," she murmured.

"An' he will," cried Robert hopefully, "for Thompson willna' disappoint me, for he kens I am in sore straits."

"Heaven bless him!" cried Jean fervently.



## CHAPTER XXII

THE next day our hero was in better health and spirits, and insisted upon being up and dressed. Jean, not without secret misgivings, got him into his clothes and helped him to the rocking-chair, which she had drawn up to the open window. For a while he sat there in silent content, bathed in the warm, golden light of the morning sun, whose genial beams seemed to infuse new vigor into his languid frame, while the gentle summer wind blew upon him with its exhilarating, refreshing warmth. After Jean had performed her household duties she returned to find him playing happily with their two boys, telling them tale after tale, while they sat perched on either arm of the big rocker, their eyes popping out of their round, healthy faces with excited interest. He looked up as she entered and smiled into her anxious face.

“Do not tire yourself, Robert,” she cautioned him gently. “Come, lads, run out doors and play a wee, your father is tired.” But they clung to him affectionately.

“One mair story,” they pleaded.

“Tell us about Tam O’Shanter’s ride!” commanded Robert, Jr., gravely. Jean sat down while



he recited the stirring tale, and watched her husband with eyes aglow with love and pity. How changed he was, she thought with a sigh. What havoc had been wrought in that sturdy frame, that fine constitution, in the once ringing tones of his musical voice. Alas, all had flown, but with God's help she would win him back to health and strength once more, she told herself with resolute determination. As he finished he kissed the earnest faces held up to his with such worshipful affection, and with a serious "Thank ye, father," they turned and marched quietly out of the room and into the open air, and soon their childish treble floated in through the open window, bringing a smile of amused affection to the faces of their parents.

"Now, Robert, ye must be tired out," remarked Jean presently. "Will ye not try and get a nappie?"

"In a wee, Jean," he answered, looking out of the window thoughtfully.

"Then you must have a bittie of gruel now," she said, rising and going toward the door.

"Nay, nay, Jean, I thank ye, but I canna' eat nor drink nor sleep just at present."

"Then try and take a nappie," she insisted, smoothing the pillows and sheets in anxious preparation.

"A little later, Jean," he replied a trifle impatiently.



She sighed patiently. "Then I'll leave ye for a while," and she walked toward the door. "Ye're quite comfortable?" she asked. He nodded. Slowly she closed the door upon him and applied herself to the task of getting the midday meal.

Presently, a knock on the door startled her, interrupting her meager preparations. Hastily wiping her hands on her apron, she opened it, and there on the threshold stood two richly dressed strangers. "From the city," she mentally said, noticing the elegance of their attire.

Courteously raising his high conical blue silk hat, the younger man addressed her. "Is not this Mistress Burns, whom I have the honor to address?" he asked.

"I am Mistress Burns," replied Jean with dignity.

"We have come to see your husband. Will you inform him, my dear madam, that his friend Henry Mackenzie would be pleased to converse with him."

Jean opened wide the door, a look of pleasure on her face. "Please to enter," she said quietly. They did so. She showed them into the living-room and bade them be seated. "Robert will be out directly," she said, and hastily went to tell Robert of their arrival.

"So this is where Scotland's Bard lives," remarked Mr. Mackenzie, looking about the room critically. "This cheerless hut, which bespeaks naught but poverty. Poor Burns, I pity him."



"'Tis all his own fault," testily replied his companion.

"I am not so sure of that, Sir William," said Mr. Mackenzie with a swift look at him. "I have always believed and maintained that Burns was innocent of that monstrous charge my Lady Glencairn brought against him, even though you did confess to being an eye witness of the occurrence. However, she has received her just deserts. She is at last totally ostracized."

"Do ye mean to say——" sputtered Sir William.

Mr. Mackenzie raised his hand in a stately gesture. "I really do not care to discuss it, Sir William. But at last Edinburgh is beginning to realize how cruelly they have misjudged him, and they would welcome him back again, but I fear his pride and independence will prevent his accepting any assistance whatever."

Sir William gave a snort of impatience. "I cannot waste my sympathy on him," he said angrily. "I am dispatched here to do my duty, and I must do it," and his mouth set in a straight, determined line.

"'Tis a duty that for once is uncommon pleasant to you," replied Mackenzie sarcastically. There was silence for a moment, then he continued, "I take it, the decision of the Board is final?" he asked.

"Aye, 'tis irrevocable, sir," replied Sir William gruffly.



“And he must live on here as a poor exciseman,” murmured Mackenzie half to himself. “Live! In sooth ’tis but an existence,” and he strode to the window in sudden perturbation and gazed thoughtfully out upon the untilled land.

The door of the chamber opened and Robert entered the room, a smile of pleasure lighting up his face. Mr. Mackenzie stepped eagerly forward and clasped his hand and shook it warmly.

“I am uncommon glad to see ye beneath my humble roof,” said Rob earnestly, “and that ye havena’ forgotten poor, hopeless Robert Burns.”

Mackenzie led him to a chair. “Indeed, I have not,” he replied brightly. “Believe me, Mr. Burns, when I say that I prize your friendship above that of all men I know.”

Robert was about to reply, when he caught sight of Sir William Creech watching them impatiently. He gave a great start and rose to his feet.

“Sir William Creech!” he said slowly and bitterly. “To what do I owe this visit?”

“I come on a matter of business,” replied Sir William, a flush rising to his cheek.

“What business can ye have with me noo?” asked Robert with rising anger. “Perjurer, have ye come to gloat over the man ye helped ruin by your iniquitous falsehood? It isna’ good news ye bring, I warrant ye, else ye would not be the bearer of it.” And he gave a scornful little laugh.



"Insulting as ever, Robert Burns," snarled Sir William, a red spot of anger on each cheek, his eyes flashing wickedly. "Well, I'll state my business briefly. Ye wrote to the Board of Commissioners for the position of supervisor in the excise. Your request has been voted on and was refused." He spat the words out with vindictive satisfaction.

"Refused!" gasped Rob incredulously. He had felt so confident that the position would be given him. He sat down weakly in his chair, dazed for a moment. "But my name has been on the list of promotion for months," he told them dully.

"'Twas scratched off some weeks ago."

"Scratched off? and why?"

"Because of your Jacobite tendencies," replied Sir William coldly. "Many reports concerning your disloyal sentiments to your country have reached the Board, which utterly ruined any chance ye might have had of promotion."

Robert sat with bowed head, crushed by his disappointment. "Again must I drink deeply of the cup of humiliation and disappointment!" he cried bitterly. Presently he looked up at Mr. Mackenzie with a grim smile on his trembling face. "I am at last persuaded, Mr. Mackenzie, that it was of me the Hebrew sage prophesied when he foretold, 'and behold, on whatsoever this man doth set his heart, it shall not prosper.'" His head dropped on his chest



—his hands clenched the sides of the chair with despairing intensity. Suddenly he jumped to his feet, his face set and drawn, his eyes wild and flashing with bitter anger. “My curse on those damned informers, who have blasted my hopes,” he exclaimed hoarsely. “May the devil be let loose to torture them to madness.” Then he sank down in his chair exhausted by his passion, his face pale and quivering.

Mr. Mackenzie hastened to his side, fearful of the consequences of the excitement on his frail constitution. Presently Robert spoke again, but in a weak, broken voice.

“My last hope is torn from me,” he said despairingly. “What shall I do now? Ah, Mr. Mackenzie, I have felt all the sweetness of applause in my short life, but I am now experiencing the bitterness of the after-taste.” And the pitiful little smile, the pathetic catch in his voice, strangely moved the heart of his listener.

“Pardon my question, Mr. Burns,” said he, “but surely the excise allows you a salary?”

Rob laughed mirthlessly. “Aye,” he replied, “the munificent sum of thirty pounds a year.”

“Thirty pounds a year!” repeated Mackenzie incredulously.

“Aye, only half of which I am getting now,” explained Robert bitterly. “Ye see I am ill and off duty.”



“And are there no royalties on your songs or published collection coming to you?”

“Ask Sir William,” retorted Robert bitterly.

“There is no demand for your poems since you left Edinburgh,” replied Sir William crustily. “The youth Walter Scott has taken your place in their regard. He shows a remarkable talent for rhyming.” And a malicious smile appeared on his crafty face as he noted the quick flush appear on the expressive countenance of the sick man.

His quivering features betrayed how deeply the barbed dart had entered his heart. He turned to Mr. Mackenzie with a resigned little gesture. “Ye see, sir,” he faltered with a pathetic smile, “how soon I am forgot.” He paused, and the weak tears of sickness welled up into his eyes; then he resumed with a shade of bitterness, “Scott is sure to succeed, for he is of noble birth. He’ll not be patronized, at least.”

Mr. Mackenzie had been thinking deeply, and now he turned to Robert with a resolute air. “Mr. Burns,” he said earnestly, “with your consent, I will go to the Board of Commissioners of Excise, of which the Duke of Gordon is the chairman, and move them to grant you full salary. They are well known to me and I am sure will not refuse my request.”

A glad smile broke up Robert’s gloomy features. “Ye are a friend, indeed!” he cried fervently. “God grant they do not refuse you, for if they do, I must



lay my account with an exit truly *en poète*, for if I die not with disease, I must perish with hunger."

"Your interference will do no good here, Mr. Mackenzie," hotly declared Sir William, glaring at Robert hatefully.

"I think it will," returned Mr. Mackenzie coolly. "Twould be Lord Glencairn's wishes were he alive, and his wishes will be respected by the Board, mark well what I tell you," and he flashed him a significant look of defiance. Then turning to Robert, he shook him by the hand and bade him adieu, saying that he must return at once to Edinburgh. "And rest assured," he concluded, "I will inform you at once of the decision of the Board, which without doubt will be favorable. Cheer up, my man, Scotland will not allow her ablest son to die of want and neglect, if Henry Mackenzie can prevent it."

"Heaven bless ye!" responded Robert gratefully.

"Mr. Burns, if you——" began Mr. Mackenzie, then he hesitated a moment, but finally after a moment's thought continued his sentence—"if you will but accept a loan," and his hand sought his pocket, but Robert shook his head decidedly.

"No, no, Mr. Mackenzie," he said proudly; "I canna' accept it, thank ye."

Mackenzie sighed. "Oh, you sensitive people," he remarked, "pride and poverty."

"Ye see," explained Robert gratefully, "I expect a few pounds from the sale of a poem, which



will relieve my temporary embarrassment, and if the commissioners grant me full salary, I can start for the seaside, where I may regain my lost health." He passed his hand wearily over his brow, which began to pain him, for the excitement had worn him out. "But I fear that has flown from me forever, that the voice of the Bard will soon be heard among ye no mair."

"Nonsense!" replied Mackenzie brightly, putting his hand affectionately on Robert's shoulder. "You will live for years yet, but you must take better care of this life which is so valuable to your family, to your friends and to the world." There was deep concern in his pleasant voice and in his earnest eyes.

At that moment the street door opened and Eppy appeared dressed youthfully in white, leading by the hand none other than Souter Johnny, who was looking decidedly crestfallen and sheepish, as he vainly tried to pull down his little short kilt over his thin, bony legs, for Souter was at last arrayed in full kilts, much to his evident sorrow. He looked exceedingly grotesque, squeezed into the suit, which was too small even for his undersized frame.

"In the name of!—Souter Johnny, what means this?" gasped Robert in amazement.

"Canna' a man wear the kilts without being laughed at?" answered Souter ruefully, resenting the amused look on their faces.

"Well, I must say ye look better in breeches,"



observed Rob with a quizzical glance at Souter's grotesquely thin crooked legs.

"He wears them for my sake," explained Eppy with a soulful look at the uncomfortable Souter; then she spied the visitors. "Why, Mr. Mackenzie, it is good to see you here!" she exclaimed effusively, and she made him a deep courtesy, purposely ignoring Sir William.

"Daft as ever," grunted Sir William audibly.

She regarded him with a haughty look of disdain. "Daft!" she repeated. "Huh! you cannot insult me now with impunity!" she exclaimed in triumph. Turning to Souter, she called him to her side with a commanding gesture.

"Noo, ye see, Robert, what has become of my breeches," whispered Souter in Robert's ear as he passed him. "She is wearing them," and he winked his eye significantly.

As he approached her, she reached out a long arm and drew him to her so suddenly that it took him off his feet. Finally he righted himself and stood close beside her, his little gray head, with the bonnet perched saucily on one side of it, scarcely reaching to her shoulder.

"Friends," she announced proudly, "this gentleman is my—my husband," and she noticed with pleasure the look of consternation which appeared on all their faces.

"What!" cried Robert aghast.



"You're married!" ejaculated Mr. Mackenzie incredulously.

"Poor man," sneered Sir William mockingly.

Eppy tittered gleefully. "Yes, I was married to-day, and 'tis heavenly," and she rolled her eyes in an ecstasy of joy.

"Well, 'twas the best you could do, I suppose," observed Sir William maliciously.

"I wouldn't take you as a gift," she flashed. "And you tried hard enough to win me, dear knows," she went on with total disregard for the truth. "He was forever running after me," she explained deprecatingly to Souter.

"You—you—you are not speaking the truth," sputtered Sir William furiously. "If I was running it was to get away from you."

"Oh, of course you won't admit it now," she observed calmly. "But I am rejoicing that I didn't marry you." She looked Souter over critically. "Well, Souter may not be very handsome," she remarked thoughtfully after a pause, "but he is a perfect picture in kilts," and she gave a sigh of absolute content.

"Women are queer creatures," whispered Souter to Robert deprecatingly, "and my—my wife, ahem! weel, she's the queerest of them a'."

"Well, my friends," laughed Mr. Mackenzie, "I protest this time I must be off. Good-by, lad."

"May blessings attend your steps and affliction



know ye not," answered Robert fervently. "Ye might take Sir William along, for he looks maist uncomfortable amongst honest people!" he added dryly.

Mackenzie laughed grimly and passed out, leaving Sir William to follow.

"Ye insulting pauper!" fumed Sir William, starting angrily for the door.

"Ye can go back to your Edinburgh friends," cried Robert with flashing eyes, "an' tell them that e'en though ye found me almost on the verge of despair, with oblivion hovering dark over my still independent head, that I yet live in the hope of seeing the prophecy I made to them all that night fulfilled, and that Sir William Creech, my worst traducer, will be the first one to again court my favor."

"I'll hear no more such insulting language!" roared Sir William threateningly.

"Ye'll not hear it t'other side of the door," replied Robert quietly.

"Aye, but ye'll get your fairin' one of these days," exclaimed Souter belligerently. "An' 'twill be in hell, where they'll roast ye like a herrin'," he added grimly, much to Eppy's horror.

"Open the door for me, fellow!" shouted Sir William wrathfully.

"Open it yoursel'," replied Souter, "an' I promise ye I'll shut it behind your coattails mighty quick."

"Out of my way, idiot," and with a shove he



brushed the little man aside and swiftly joined his waiting companion outside the gate.

“Did ye see that?” gasped Souter, his eyes flashing fire. “Did ye see that? Let me get after him,” and he started for the door, with blood in his eyes, but Eppy with a little shriek of alarm grabbed him by the plaidie and held on to him with all her strength, which was not slight.

“Don’t, dearie, don’t, you might get hurt!” she cried tearfully.

“Weel, if ye say not, why I’ll let him gae,” returned Souter submissively.

“Come, Robert,” said Jean gently, “you must lie down for a wee bit now.”

“By the way, Rob,” laughed Souter reminiscently, “do ye mind the day——” He stopped short as Jean shook her head disapprovingly.

“He’s had a most exciting morning,” she exclaimed gently, “and needs rest now. He’ll be feeling more peart to-morrow,” and she held out her hand in dismissal.

“Ye mean get out, eh, Mistress?” said Souter good-naturedly. “Weel, weel, Souter Johnny can take a hint.”

“Come, Souter,” called Eppy from the open doorway, where she had been impatiently waiting for her bridegroom, “come with me to your—your new home,” and she bashfully held her fan over her face with a nervous little giggle.



“Aye, that I will,” replied Souter, with alacrity. He turned to Robert with a new air of dignity which set comically upon his little figure. “If we can do anything for ye, Robert, dinna’ forget to send over to MacDougall House. Dinna’ forget my address. Mrs. MacDougall, my arm.” She grabbed it quickly and they walked to the door. “God-day all,” he called over his shoulder, and with a feeling of great contentment, that at last his troubles were over, and that he was entering upon a new life of ease and plenty, he closed the door behind them, and trotted along beside his wife, grinning like a schoolboy, across the fields to their new home.

“Has the Posty come yet?” inquired Robert, after they had gone.

“Yes, but he brought no letter for ye,” answered Jean sadly.

The words of one of the verses of his “Ode to a Mouse,” came to him with gloomy presentiment.

“But, mousie, thou art no thy lane,  
 In proving foresight may be vain;  
 The best-laid schemes o’ mice and men  
     Gang aft agley;  
 An’ lea’e us naught but grief an’ pain  
     For promised joy;  
 Still thou are blest compared wi’ me!  
 The present only touchest thee;  
 But och! I backward cast my e’e,  
     On prospects drear’;  
 An forward, tho’ I canna’ see,  
     I guess and fear.”



## CHAPTER XXIII

LATER that day two men might have been seen galloping their horses at full speed toward the little house on the hillside. They were determined, resolute looking men, evidently bent on serious purpose. Finally they reached the gate, and dismounting made their way to the door, the elder man insisting loudly upon accompanying the other, much to his visible annoyance.

"There is no need for secrecy, Gilbert Burns," said he grimly, and he followed him into the house and to the room where Robert sat with pencil in hand vainly courting his Muse. Jean, who was busily engaged in sewing, jumped to her feet with a little cry of amazement upon seeing her father before her. Robert held out his hand to his brother in delighted surprise, mixed with anxiety.

"Brother!" he cried, "what brings ye to Ellisland in such haste? Is it bad news? Mother, our sisters, are they ill?"

"Nay," replied Gilbert constrainedly. "They are all well, Rob, and have sent their love to yourself and family."

"Thank God for that," responded Robert thank-



fully. There was a little embarrassed silence, then Gilbert spoke again.

"Robert, we—we are in sore trouble," he confessed, his face anxious and troubled.

"Trouble!" echoed Rob blankly. "What is wrong, brother?"

"I cannot hold Mossgiel any longer," he replied, dejectedly. "The farm is but a wretched lease, as ye know, an' I canna' weather out the remaining year. Without assistance, Robert, I canna' hope to hold our little family together any longer."

Robert's heart sank within him as he heard the direful news. He glanced at Squire Armour apprehensively. "And Squire Armour?" he interrogated with an angry glance at that gentleman, who stood with a sneering smile on his harsh face, taking in the evidences of poverty that surrounded them. And with never a word of love or pity, nor of greeting to his daughter who sat there with white face and longing eyes, waiting to hear some news from her stern, implacable father, of her loving mother at home.

"I have bought the lease of Mossgiel," he growled, "an' if your brother canna' pay up the back rent, which is long past due, I shall seize everything and turn the whole lot of them out, every one."

Robert looked at him a moment in scornful silence. Presently he spoke, and the cutting sarcasm of his voice caused the old Squire to wince and drop his eyes.



"Ye are a most just, square, God-fearin' man, Squire Armour," he said. "The Kirk should be proud of ye." Turning to Gilbert, he asked him the amount of his debt.

"Only a matter of £4, brother," he replied, "but 'tis a fortune to me at present."

"An' I must have the money to-day or the farm, I care not which."

"Oh, father!" cried Jean, going to him, "do not be hard on him; he will pay you; only give him time."

"Jean!" flashed Robert angrily, "dinna' stoop to ask mercy of that mon, even though he be your own father." Jean turned away with a sigh.

Squire Armour laughed derisively. "Ye'll both be on your knees before long, I'll warrant," he cried harshly, "asking favors of me, especially when ye have naught to feed a starving family. Ye have made yoursel' a fine, comfortable bed, my lassie, havena' ye?" He sneered sarcastically, turning to his shrinking daughter. "But 'tis made, and ye can lie on it, ye ungrateful minx."

Robert rose quickly to his feet, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"Stop! Squire Armour!" he commanded. "Dinna' dare to use such language to my wife in my own house, or weak, sick, and crippled as I am, I will throw ye into the road like the cur that ye are." He stopped, breathless with indignation. Presently



he resumed with immeasurable scorn in his vibrating voice, "An' they call such men as ye Christians! A sneaking, crawling, psalm-singing, canting hypocrite! Faugh! Were I the Lord, I would sicken at sight of ye." He turned away and sat down beside his now weeping wife, and there was pity and compassion in the look he bestowed upon her.

"I've had enough of your blasphemy, Robert Burns. If ye canna' pay the rent for your brother, my business is elsewhere."

"I had no one else to turn to in this, my hour of trouble," murmured Gilbert brokenly. "If ye can help me without impoverishing yoursel', for God's sake do it, or I shudder to think what will become of the dear ones at home."

Robert was silent. He thought with anxious loving concern of his own little flock, of the slender resources at his command, of the gravity of his own situation, sick as he was and with such gloomy prospects staring him in the face—and yet was he not better off after all than they at Mossgiel? Had he not his salary, small as it was, and the promise of the supervisorship, besides the money that Thompson would pay him for his poem? He had much to thank God for, he thought gratefully.

"I see 'tis no use delaying longer," said Armour, looking at the serious, downcast faces before him. "I have given ye fair warning, Gilbert Burns, an' noo I'll go."



He had reached the door, when Robert spoke quietly but firmly. "Wait!" he called. "Ye shall have the money, ye Shylock."

"Thank God!" cried Gilbert with a loving glance at his brother's calm face.

Jean looked at him in speechless amazement. What did he mean? How could he help others when they were in such dire need themselves? she asked herself apprehensively.

"Robert," she whispered anxiously, "ye dinna' ken what ye say."

"My brother will meet ye at sundown, at the Inn," continued Robert without heeding her warning, although his face took on a whiter hue. "He will bring ye every farthing of what is due ye. Noo go; there is the door; your business here is ended. Ye have brought naught but misery and trouble into my life by your unreasonable hatred o' me, but the time will come, Squire Armour, when all the unhappiness and suffering ye have caused me and mine will rise up before ye like a hideous phantom, robbin' ye of all peace o' mind on earth, and your hopes of salvation hereafter." He drew nearer the gaping man, who was regarding him with angry, sullen eyes, and continued with a bitter, unforgiving intensity that filled his listeners with awe and horror, "An' when ye feel the chill icy hand of grim death clutching at your heart, ye'll cry out for the sympathy and love of those whom ye cast out of your life, but



ye'll cry in vain, an' ye'll die as ye have lived, a miserable wretched ending to a miserable selfish life."

As he finished his grim prophecy, Squire Armour gave a cry of nervous fear, and with blanched face and wild eyes he strove to speak, but the words would not pass his white, trembling lips. Finally he gasped in a frightened whisper which gradually rose to angry defiance:

"How dare ye! How dare ye say such things to me, Robert Burns? I willna' die like that and ye canna' frighten me with your grim forebodings." He paused and glanced at them all in turn, then hastily opened the door. Just as he was stepping out, he turned slowly and looked at the white, patient face of his daughter. For a moment he regarded her in silence, then with a visible effort he addressed her.

"Jean," he said, and his voice was noticeably softer, "ye are welcome to come back to your home." He cast a quick look at the lowering face of his son-in-law and added vindictively—"alone."

"Nay, never alone, father," replied Jean sadly, looking at her husband's frowning face.

The old man turned with sudden fury upon them. "I'll wait till sundown for my money," he shouted, "but not a minute longer!" and he closed the door behind him with a vicious slam.

Gilbert was first to break the depressing silence



that ensued. He felt vaguely that all was not so well with his brother as he had been led to believe.

"Forgive me, brother," he murmured contritely, "for bringing this trouble on ye."

"Never mind, Gilbert; it was to be, I ken," answered Rob absently.

Gilbert was silent a moment. "But the money, Robert, is it—are ye——" he stammered, then stopped in embarrassed confusion.

"'Tis the sum I expect from the sale of a poem. Jean, see if there is aught of the Posty." She rose and went to the window and peered anxiously down the dusty road.

"I didna' have the ready money with me," went on Robert lightly, as if it were a matter of small importance, "or I would have fixed it up at once. But ye shall hae the money, laddie, when my letter comes," and he smiled reassuringly into Gilbert's anxious face.

"God bless ye, Robert; ye have taken a great load off my heart."

Jean returned to her seat by the hearth, and listlessly took up her needlework. "I fear Posty has forgotten us to-day," she said in answer to Robert's questioning look.

A great fear seized his heart. For nearly a week he had hopefully awaited some word from Thompson. What could be the matter? "O God!" he prayed





“‘I’ll wait till sundown for my money,’ he shouted.”







silently, "let him not fail me noo." With a bright smile that sadly belied his anxious heart, he rose and, taking Gilbert's arm, said gayly, "Come, brother, and see the new bairn that has been added to the flock this last year."

As they left the room Jean dropped her work in her lap and gazed after them with eyes filled with helpless tears of anxiety, at the thought of the hardships and suffering that lay in wait for them all.

After admiring the baby in the trundle bed the two brothers talked of the dear ones in Mossgiel, and the many changes time had wrought in the lives of them all; spoke with tenderness of the sister who had recently been married—and dwelt with anxious concern on the struggles of their younger brother, who had left home to branch out for himself. For a time they forgot their own troubles, and Robert plied his brother with many questions concerning the welfare of all his old friends and neighbors, while Gilbert told him all the gossip of the village, of the prosperity of some of the lads, and the unfortunate situations of many of the others, thus leading up to the recital of their own troubles since Robert had left his home. He listened sorrowfully to the tale of hardship and unceasing toil which brought such little recompense, but not by word or look did he betray his own blighted hopes and gloomy prospects. Finally they had exhausted every subject save one, and that one had been uppermost in the minds of



both, but each had avoided the subject with a shrinking dread.

No news of the little dairymaid had come to Robert for almost a year, and the thought that possibly she was ill or dead—or—and a hundred conjectures racked his brain and froze the eager questions that trembled on his lips. Gilbert must have read the longing in his brother's heart, for, after a troubled glance at the dark yearning face gazing at him so beseechingly, he looked down at his toil-worn hands and awkwardly shifted one knee over the other. Presently he spoke.

"Mary is still at Colonel Montgomery's," he observed, making an effort to speak lightly.

"I heard she had left Mrs. Dunlop's," replied Robert feverishly, moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Aye," sighed Gilbert. "She grew tired o' the city and longed for the stillness, the restfulness of country life once more, so she came back to us and took her old place in the dairy. Poor lass," and he looked thoughtfully out of the window and sadly watched the glorious sunset tinting the distant hills in a blaze of golden light.

"An'—an' is she well—is she happy?" murmured Robert in a soft, hushed voice. Gilbert did not answer for a moment. Presently he roused himself and slowly let his gaze wander back till it rested on his brother's wistful face.



“Can ye bear a shock, brother?” he asked quietly.

Robert suddenly stiffened and his eyes grew wide and staring. He gripped the sides of the chair as a wave of sudden dizziness dulled his understanding. Presently it passed away, and like one in a dream he whispered hoarsely, “Tell me the worst, Gilbert; is—is she dead?”

He closed his eyes and waited with breathless stillness for the answer.

“Thank God, not that!” replied Gilbert feelingly. Robert breathed a sigh of relief. “But she is very ill, an’ I ken she hasna’ long on earth noo. The doctors say there is no hope for her,” and he bit his lips to keep back the rising tears.

Slowly, sorrowfully, Robert’s head drooped till it rested on his bosom. For a moment he sat like one on the verge of dissolution.

“Oh, God!” he moaned bitterly, “that sweet young life crushed out in all its innocent purity, like a delicate flower, and through my sin, my reckless folly. Oh, how can I live and bear my punishment!” A convulsive sob racked his weakened frame. Gilbert bent over him with tears in his eyes, forgetting his own crushing sorrow in witnessing that of his brother.

“Dinna’ greet so, Robert,” he cried. “’Twas not your fault, ye ken. It was to be.” His philosophical belief in fate helped him over many a hard



and stony path, and enabled him to meet with calmness and fortitude the many heartaches and disappointments which befell him.

Soon the convulsive shudders ceased, and leaning wearily back in his chair, Robert fixed his great mournful eyes upon his brother in sorrowful resignation.

"How did she look when ye last saw her, Gilbert?" he asked faintly, pressing his hand tightly to his heart, for the old pain had come back with exhausting results.

"Like an angel, lad," replied Gilbert tenderly. "So sweet and pure, so patient and forgiving."

"Does she suffer much?"

"Nay," he answered reassuringly. Then he continued, his voice soft and low, his strong features quivering from the restraint he put upon his feelings, "Her life is just slowly slipping away from her; day by day she grows weaker and weaker, but ne'er a complaint is on her lips. She is always so cheerful an' smilin' that it fair makes ye weep to see her fadin' awa' so fast," and his voice broke into a hard sob.

"Oh, Mary, my Highland Mary!" murmured Robert brokenly.

"Her last wish is to see the Highlands, to—to die there," continued Gilbert, his lips contracting with a sudden, sharp pain at the thought. "So before she grows any weaker, Mrs. Dunlop, who has come



from town to see her, and who is wi' her noo, is goin' to take her back to her old home in Argyleshire."

"Going home to die!" repeated Robert dreamily. "Oh, if I might be taken awa' too, if my end would only hasten," he muttered despairingly, with the weak selfishness of the sick and sorrowing. "Then might our departing souls be united as one, to be together for all eternity."

"Hush, Robert!" cautioned Gilbert, looking fearfully at the closed door. "Remember Jean and the bairns."

"Gilbert, I must see her before she goes!" he cried utterly distracted. "'Tis for the last time on earth, ye ken, lad," and he jumped up, trembling with eager excitement.

"Brother, would ye kill yoursel'?" cried Gilbert, seeking to restrain him. "'Tis madness for ye to go out in your weak condition."

"Dinna' stop me, Gilbert!" he panted, and he flung open the door and rushed excitedly into the room where Jean sat in patient meditation. "Jean, get my bonnet and coat, quick, quick!" he commanded with his old-time vehemence. She jumped up pale and frightened and looked questioningly at Gilbert. Quickly he told her of Mary's illness and Robert's determination to go to her at once. When he had finished she went to her husband, the tears of ready sympathy in her eyes, for she was not jealous of his love for Mary. She had gotten over that long



ago, and laying her hand gently on his arm, she tried to coax him to sit down and listen to them.

“They’ll have to pass by here on their way to Greenock,” she told him tenderly. “And ye may be sure, Robert, that Mary will not leave Ayrshire without saying good-by to you.” And so she reasoned with him, while Gilbert joined her in assurances of Mrs. Dunlop’s intention of stopping to see him as she passed the farm. Gradually the wild light in his eyes died down, the tense figure relaxed, and with a sigh of exhaustion he allowed himself to be taken back to his room.

“Ye’re sure she’ll not forget to stop here?” he asked with pathetic eagerness. Then he continued with wistful retrospection, “Two years have come and gone and not a word have we spoken to each other since that day we parted in Edinburgh! Oh, cruel, cruel fate!” He spoke so low that none heard him.

“Noo, Robert,” said Jean brightly, “you must take your gruel, ’twill give ye strength.” But he made a gesture of repulsion.

“Nay, Jean, I canna’ eat noo; ’twould choke me. I think I’ll lay me down to rest.” They soon prepared him for bed. Without a word, he turned his face to the wall and for the rest of the night he lay there with wide, staring, sleepless eyes, thinking, thinking, thinking.



## CHAPTER XXIV

News of Robert's illness soon reached Edinburgh, along with reports of his misconduct, profligacy, and intemperance, reports which were grossly exaggerated, together with many other slanderous falsehoods.

And rumors of his poverty and the destitute condition of his family brought sorrow and anxiety to the hearts of many of his loyal friends, who were only too ready and willing to offer him all the help and assistance that would be needed, but they knew, too, his inflexible pride and independence, and realized how futile would be their offers of friendly assistance.

For some days Lady Nancy Gordon had been anxiously puzzling her brain for some thought or scheme whereby she could help the unfortunate Bard who was plunged in such depths of poverty and misfortune. She was thinking of him now as she sat at the harpsichord, her fingers wandering idly over the keyboard in a running accompaniment to her thoughts. Her father softly entered the room at this juncture, but she did not turn her head nor intimate that she was aware of his presence. Pres-



ently her touch grew more and more tender. Anon she glided into one of those dreamily joyous, yet sorrowful, mazurkas, that remind one of gay wild flowers growing in rich profusion over silent and forgotten graves. Lady Nancy had reason to boast of herself, for she was a perfect mistress of the instrument—and as her fingers closed on the final chord, she wheeled round abruptly on the chair, and rising to her feet greeted her father with a tender smile. For a moment she regarded him in thoughtful silence, then as he laid down his paper, she walked up to him, a frown of displeasure wrinkling her smooth, white forehead.

“I think, father,” she said deliberately, with a haughty uptilt of her pretty nose, “I think it is perfectly disgraceful the way that hackney scribbler who writes for yon journal,” indicating the paper on the table, “either through malice or ignorance affixes such degrading epithets to the name of the Bard of Scotland, for by no other name will I ever speak of Robert Burns,” and she flashed an angry glance at the offending paper.

“Poor obstinate lad,” sighed the Duke thoughtfully. His mind went back to the day after the garden party at Glencairn Hall, when he had sent for Robert to honor them with his presence at Gordon House, and how the poet had taken offense at some thoughtless remark of his, given in kindly spirit; how with haughty pride, and wounded dig-



nity, he had gotten up from the table and after thanking them for their hospitality, declared he had not come to be insultingly patronized and pitied, and refusing to listen to reason, or explanation, he had left in bitter resentment and blind misunderstanding. Lady Nancy too was thinking the same thoughts, and after a moment's meditation she looked into her father's kindly face and remarked earnestly:

"Father, something must be done for him and his family at once."

"But, my dear," he meekly replied, "our hands are tied by his own obstinacy."

"Can we not get up a subscription for him?" she asked. He shook his head slowly.

"'Twould be to no purpose, Nancy," he returned thoughtfully. "He would refuse all offers of pecuniary aid. I know well his independent principles, and so do you."

They talked over many plans and projects, but none seemed feasible, and they were about to give up in despair, when Henry Mackenzie was announced. He had just arrived from Ellisland, and immediately spoke of his visit to the poet, and under what painful conditions he had found him—told them of his promise to Burns to secure the office of supervisor for him, and had called to consult with his lordship concerning its bestowal.

Nancy listened with bated breath and tear-dimmed eyes as he spoke of the change in Robert, his pov-



erty, his indomitable courage and independence, in spite of the ravages of disease and the black, gloomy outlook for future prosperity.

“Nancy and I were just discussing some means of alleviating his distress as you entered,” said the Duke as Mr. Mackenzie finished his recital. “And it affords me much gratification to be able to assist him to the office of supervisor of the excise and its attendant increase of salary.”

“’Twill be a God-send to him, believe me, my lord,” returned Mr. Mackenzie feelingly.

“The news will be dispatched to him at once!” cried Nancy with sparkling eyes. “’Twill relieve his present distress of mind.”

With that assurance, Mr. Mackenzie rose, and thanking them for their kindness in behalf of the indigent poet, took his leave.

Having finished luncheon, the old Duke excused himself, and going to his study, he made out the necessary papers of promotion for the struggling exciseman, with many a shake of his head and pitying sigh for the young genius who was reduced to such straits—driven to such a commonplace calling, through his headstrong recklessness, his foolish ideas of independence. Having signed them he sat back in thoughtful meditation. Suddenly the door opened, and his daughter asked permission to enter. Having gained it, she crossed to her father, and sinking down beside him, in an eager, impetuous



manner quickly laid before him a project which had been formulating in her active brain while he was busy writing out the papers.

He started back in amazement. "What!" he cried. "Are you out of your senses, Nancy?"

"Now, papa, listen!" she exclaimed earnestly. "'Twill take but a day's ride to reach Dumfries, and think how delighted he will be to receive the promotion from your hands," and she slyly noted the effect of the bit of delicate flattery.

He frowned and pursed his lips for a moment, and idly tapped the folded papers against his knee in thought. These signs boded success, as Nancy well knew, and springing to her feet she gave him a big hug that set him gasping.

"Look here, Mistress Nancy!" he exclaimed as soon as he recovered his breath, "why do you want to take this wearisome journey at this season of the year, just to visit the home of this poor exciseman?" and he wonderingly regarded the face that had suddenly grown flushed and pensive, as she looked with worshipful eyes at the large engraving over the fireplace, which contained the figure of Burns in a characteristic attitude, reading one of his poems to the group of people that surrounded him.

"I want to see him once more before the fire of his genius grows cold," she answered dreamily. "I want to see him in his home with his—his wife and



children around him." She might have told him that she was heart-hungry for a sight of that dark, glowing face, the flashing black eyes that had thrilled her with such blissful pain, for the sound of that rich, majestic voice, that had so often stirred the uttermost depths of her heart. She felt that the yearning of her soul would not be satisfied till she had seen him again, spoken with him. She hoped, yet dreaded, that the sight of his changed face, his miserable surroundings, the commonplaceness of it all, of meeting the exciseman with his wife and children around him, rather than the idealized poet, would silence forever the strange unrest of her soul, banish all thoughts of sentiment from her mind, and destroy the spell of glamour which he had all unconsciously thrown about her. These thoughts flew through her mind with lightning speed while her father was making up his mind how best to dissuade her from her purpose.

"I fear me, Nancy, 'twill give us both more pain than pleasure," he said finally. "We may even lose our respect for him."

"Don't say that, father!" she cried reproachfully. "No matter how low he may have fallen, and I protest that fame has exaggerated his misconduct woefully, we people of Scotland cannot forget nor overlook the priceless treasure he has put into our thankless hands, a treasure that will be handed down to posterity with ever increasing regard, admiration



and love for its author," and her flashing blue eyes, that had so often reminded Robert of Mary Campbell, and which had formed a closer tie of comradeship between them, again sought and lingered upon the engraved likeness of her hero. The singular beauty of Lady Nancy Gordon was illumined by that happy expression of countenance which results from the union of cultivated tastes and superior understanding with the finest affections of mind, and the influence of such attractions had been keenly felt by the ardent poet, who was not altogether unaware of the impression he had made upon her heart, which was as susceptible to the charms of wit and intellect as was his own. As she stood gazing up at the picture, she thought with an odd little smile how she had openly sought for his favors, delighted in his apparent preference for her society even while she told herself she knew he was only attracted by her brilliancy—that she appealed to his intellect—charmed him by her wit, her cleverness. No, she had never touched his heart, she thought with a sigh, and a look of sadness came into her thoughtful eyes.

"I fear, Nancy, that Robert still harbors feelings of resentment against us," protested the Duke after a pause. "I know he would rather not see us."

But Lady Nancy overruled his objection. "Then all the more reason for our assuring him of our



friendship and asking his forgiveness for any offense we have unintentionally offered him."

Seeing all arguments were useless, the old Duke finally consented, and with a hug and a kiss, Nancy left him and proceeded to make arrangements for their speedy departure for Ayrshire.



## CHAPTER XXV

THE next morning dawned bleak and dismal. A damp, penetrating mist hung over the farm like a pall, and the chill of the rain-laden air penetrated into the rooms and made itself felt even by the side of the brightest fires. It affected the inmates of Ellisland farm to an alarming extent. They sat gloomily around the hearth idly watching the smoldering peat fire, which failed to send out much warmth—as if it, too, felt the depressing influences which surrounded the little household and which had plunged them all into such a slough of despond.

Robert had partaken of his bowl of porridge and now lay upon his bed, grateful for the added warmth of the woolen blankets which Jean had thrown over him with thoughtful solicitude. He appeared to the anxious watchers to be more like himself than he had been for some days, in spite of his restless, sleepless nights, as he lay there peacefully enjoying the antics of the children who were playing gleefully but quietly around the room their favorite game of “Blind man’s holiday.”

At sundown the night before Gilbert had hastened to the Inn to meet Squire Armour and to plead for another day’s grace, but the implacable old man



refused to listen to him when he found he had failed to bring the money, and stormily took his departure with threats of instant eviction, leaving Gilbert in a state of utter distraction. He watched the Squire ride furiously away in the direction of Mossgiel with a heavy, sinking fear at his heart, then slowly made his way, with pale face and clenched hands, back to his brother's cottage, where he wrestled with the fears that assailed him in despairing silence. Several times during the night he was on the verge of saddling his horse and dashing home, but the hope that the morning would bring the long-expected letter to Robert checked the impulse, and so he sat the long night through anxiously waiting for the dawn, praying fervently that he might not be too late to save his dear ones from the vindictive anger, the unyielding resolution of their irate landlord.

And now morning was here at last. Robert had fallen into a profound slumber of nervous exhaustion. Jean tucked him in carefully with the warm blankets, and taking the children with her, quietly closed the door upon the sleeping man with a prayer of thankfulness for his temporary respite from the troubles that surged about his head.

When her duties were over and the children playing on the green, Jean took her sewing and joined Gilbert in the living room. He was walking restlessly up and down, with nervous, flashing eyes



that eagerly searched the road, as he passed and repassed the small window. His restless pacing, his look of hopeful anxiety smote Jean to the heart, for she had been bitterly resentful, and was still in a measure, against Gilbert's selfishness in thinking only of his own extremity. It didn't seem right or just that he should be here with outstretched hands, waiting to take the money that meant so much to their own struggling family at the present time, and without which she could only foresee grim want staring them all in the face—and she had to struggle with the desire that rushed over her to rise up and tell him of their bitter plight, to bid him go elsewhere for assistance; but the fear of Robert's anger kept her silent. Then, too, she suddenly remembered that they had both kept their poverty and Robert's continued ill luck and failures from the home folk, and it was only to be expected that Gilbert would naturally turn to his prosperous brother for assistance. "Prosperous, indeed! If he but knew," and she sighed deeply, for her mother's heart felt sore depressed as she thought of her own loved ones. They did not talk much. Each was too busy with his own gloomy thoughts.

In fancy, Gilbert could see Squire Armour at Moss-giel Farm, ordering out his mother and sister, watching them with sinister eyes as they got together their meager belongings, and then when they, with streaming eyes, had carried out the last piece of



furniture and stood gazing at the home that was no longer theirs, the cruel landlord had heartlessly laughed at their sorrow and, locking the door, had ridden away with the keys in his pocket, leaving them standing there not knowing whither to go nor where to find food or shelter.

"O God! Not that! Not that!" he cried aloud, pausing in his walk with clenched hands, pale and wild-eyed.

Jean looked up from her work in startled alarm. "Gilbert!" she cried. "What is it?"

With a little mirthless laugh, he told her of the vision he had had, told of his fears for the safety of his home and the welfare of his loved ones.

She listened with a feeling of shame at her heart and a flush of angry humiliation mantling her pale cheek.

"'Fore Heaven, it makes me feel like cursing even the memory of my father," she exclaimed bitterly with a flash of her old-time imperiousness. "But be not alarmed, Gilbert," she continued with an encouraging smile. "Your mother is a match even for my father, and I'll warrant she'll not let him set his foot inside the threshold till you return." His face brightened.

"I had indeed forgot my mother's independent, courageous spirit," he replied with a sigh of relief and hopefulness.

The depressing gloom thus lifted, they soon drifted



into a friendly, earnest conversation, and the minutes sped by without, however, the looked-for interruption of the overdue postman.

Outside, the mist had long since been dispersed by the warm rays of the noonday sun, which was now shining brilliantly. A soft moisture glittered on every tiny leaf of the wild rose bushes which clustered beneath the window of the little cot, and on every blade of grass. The penetrating and delicious odor of sweet violets and blue-bells scented each puff of wind, and now and then the call of the meadow lark pierced the air with a subdued far-off shrillness. Suddenly the peaceful stillness was broken in upon by the sound of footsteps crunching slowly along the garden path on their way to the door of the cottage.

The Duke of Gordon and his daughter had arrived in Dumfries the night before, and, after a night's rest, they took the coach to Ellisland and put up at the little old Inn. There they made inquiries for the whereabouts of the home of the poet of the little old man who was boastfully describing the splendors of MacDougall House, none other than our old friend Souter, once more in his breeches, having asserted his authority, much to his wife's secret satisfaction, for "she did so love a masterful man." Whereupon Souter condescendingly offered to conduct them to the place they sought. And now, as they looked at the poor clay biggin and the evidences of poverty



and neglect which surrounded them on all sides, their hearts sank within them.

"I suppose we will find Mr. Burns greatly changed?" said Nancy interrogatively with a little shudder of dread.

"Weel, mum," replied Souter reflectively, "we all change in time, ye ken. Some for worse, like mysel', and some for the better, like yoursel', askin' your pardon for my boldness. And ye ken Robbie's life has been very hard these past few years." He sighed and shook his head dolefully. "But I want to say right here," and his heavy eyebrows drew together in a black scowl, "Robbie Burns' sickness is na' due to his drinkin', as ye people of Edinburgh believe, and put in yer penny papers. Robbie is na drunkard. I hae known him from infancy, and I affirm that he has never been guilty of the gross enormities he has been charged with. He could always attend to his duties," and he looked with aggressive suspicion into the downcast faces of his listeners for some sign of doubt of his assertion, which, though stanchly loyal, was not altogether true, as he knew only too well. "But there is nae use telling all ye know," he told himself philosophically. "And what people don't know about the food they eat, will no hurt their appetites."

"I am very glad to hear that," ejaculated the Duke warmly.

"An' he is a fond father an' a maist affectionate



husband," continued Souter stoutly. "I'll go in noo and tell him ye're here," and he strode into the house, leaving the couple standing in the path much to their astonishment.

"It doesn't seem right, father," said Lady Nancy sadly, "for such genius to dwell in that little hut, amid such surroundings. How I pity him."

There was a suggestion of tears in the sweet voice which her fond father noticed with sudden apprehension. He looked at her closely.

"Who is to blame for his being here?" he retorted firmly. She remained discreetly silent. Then he continued in a softer voice, "But I mustn't blame nor censure him, now that he is sick, and down at the bottom again. It is, indeed, a lasting pity that such genius should be allowed to smother here in poverty and among questionable companions, who, 'tis said, seek only to bring him to their level, and who, alas! are but too surely dragging him there, I fear, a weak, unresisting, but also a remorseful, repentant victim."

"And must he stay on here, father, to die a poor exciseman?" asked Nancy with a strangely beating heart. "Even the added salary of the Supervisorship cannot be sufficient to keep such a family." At that moment Souter opened the door. They turned to him quietly.

"Well, what says Mr. Burns?" asked the Duke impatiently.



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A little smile of amusement appeared on Souter's face. "Mr. Burns begs you to enter and to be seated," he replied.

They complied with the injunction and were shown into the living-room, where they seated themselves.

"I was also to tell ye," continued Souter dryly, "that he will be with ye as soon as he can get into his damned rags."

"What!" exclaimed the Duke laughingly.

"Excuse me, your ladyship," answered Souter with a little nod to Lady Nancy, "but them's his own words and I'm no the one to change the language o' a Scottish poet."

"Has he only rags to wear?" asked Lady Nancy pitifully.

"Hush!" cautioned her father, "he is here."

The door opened and Robert slowly entered the room. He had thrown his wide plaid around his shoulders, over his loose white shirt, and held it together with one hand that gleamed very white and thin against the bright colors. His black hair, now faintly streaked with gray and which had thinned considerably above his forehead, hung loosely about his neck, framing his gaunt face, and accentuating his pallor.

For a moment they gazed upon the wreck of the once stalwart and ruggedly healthy youth, too shocked to utter a word. Robert was the first to break the silence.



"My lord," he exclaimed with something of his old brightness, "I am rejoiced, indeed, to see you at Ellisland. 'Tis a great surprise, but none the less a welcome one." He shook the Duke's outstretched hand with fervor.

"The pleasure is mutual, my lad," responded the Duke warmly. "'Tis a few years now since we parted, and in anger, too."

"I was in the wrong that night," broke in Robert penitently, with a rueful shake of the head. "I sadly misjudged ye there, as I learned afterward, but my stubborn pride refused to accept the olive branch ye held out to me. Ye see," he explained frankly, "'twas my unreasoning wounded pride and anger, and my disappointment which blinded me to all sense of right and justice. I realized after that ye were my friends and that ye resented the damning insult put upon me at Glencairn Hall." He paused a moment, a frown of bitterness wrinkling his brow. Presently he looked up and holding out his hand again with one of the old magnetic smiles, said, "An' ye have forgiven my ingratitude, an' are come noo to see me! I thank ye."

"'Tis all forgot. I forgave you at the time," responded the Duke cordially. "I could not hold resentment against you." He turned to his daughter, who was partly concealed in the embrasure of the deep window.

"Nancy, child, speak to Robert." She came



slowly forward with hand outstretched, a faint flush dyeing her creamy skin, or perhaps it was the reflection of the pink satin gown she was wearing beneath the long velvet cloak, which, becoming unhooked, had slipped down off her shoulders.

Robert rose to his feet, and his black, gloomy eyes lighted up with pleasure as they rested upon the dainty vision of loveliness before him. Lady Nancy had always reminded him of Mary Campbell, and to-day the resemblance was more striking than ever. For beneath the large leghorn with its waving, black plumes, her golden hair so like Mary's, for the once unpowdered, glittered in all its beauty. Perhaps my Lady Nancy had remembered the likeness and had purposely heightened it by forgetting to use the powder which had hitherto covered the golden curls at all times. As she stood there with a wistful look upon her face, it was easy to perceive the resemblance to the timid dairymaid who, in borrowed finery, had created such a sensation at the Duchess of Athol's "at home" three years before.

"Lady Nancy, forgive my rudeness in not greeting you sooner," he exclaimed fervently.

"I am so glad we are reconciled, friends, once more," she exclaimed impulsively. "It did seem as if you would never relent, you stubborn man," and she smiled archly into his embarrassed face.

"You find me greatly changed, of course," he remarked after they had discoursed a while upon



their journey. She remained silent, but he read the sympathy shining in her blue eyes.

"We read of your illness in town," explained the Duke, "and believe me, Robert, we are deeply sorry for your affliction. But I trust the vigor of your constitution will soon set you on your feet again," and he gave him a cheery smile of encouragement.

Robert shook his head gloomily. "My health is, I think, flown from me forever," he replied sadly, "altho' I am beginning to crawl about the house, and once, indeed, have I been seen outside my cottage door."

"Why didn't you let us know of your illness before?" exclaimed Lady Nancy reproachfully. "We are your friends."

Robert flushed painfully. "My miserable health was brought on and aggravated solely by my headstrong, thoughtless carelessness, and I felt so heartily ashamed of myself that I sought to conceal from all friends my real condition, but 'tis out at last. How long I will be confined to the house, God alone knows," and he sighed deeply.

"Do not give yourself up to despondency, my lad," encouraged the Duke brightly, "nor speak the language of despair. You must get well."

"Indeed I must!" returned Robert grimly, "for I have three strong, healthy boys and if I am nipt off at the command of fate—gracious God! what



would become of my little flock?" and a look of distraction swept over his face at the thought.

"Don't distress yourself needlessly, Robert!" exclaimed the Duke kindly. Then he continued earnestly, "If anything should happen to you, if you should be taken off before I am called, I promise that the children of Robert Burns shall never come to want."

"'Twould be a lasting disgrace to Scotland," flashed Lady Nancy with kindling eyes.

Robert grasped the Duke's hand impulsively. "God bless ye for your noble assurance!" he cried. "Ye have lifted a heavy weight of care and anxiety off my mind."

"Why, father!" suddenly exclaimed Lady Nancy, "I vow if you are not forgetting your principal errand here." He looked at her with a puzzled frown. "Mr. Burns' promotion," she reminded him laughingly.

"Gad zooks!" he exclaimed in amazement, jumping to his feet. "What an old dolt I am, to be sure." Hastily diving his hand in the inside pocket of his elaborate, black-flowered satin square-cut, he pulled out a long paper with a red seal attached and handed it to the now bewildered Robert, who, after a quick glance at their smiling faces, opened the paper and quickly read its contents. Then he gave a gasp, followed by an ejaculation of delighted surprise and gratification.



"My lord," he exclaimed, "this is indeed a gift to bring gladness to a man's heart. I thank ye most gratefully for my promotion, and will endeavor to perform my duties to the best of my poor abilities as soon as my strength returns." And the look of anxiety gave way to one of comparative contentment.

"And your immediate recovery is of the first importance," returned the Duke brightly. "You need a change."

"Why not come to town, where you can have the best of medical attendance?" asked Lady Nancy quietly, though her heart beat furiously as she offered the suggestion.

"That is impossible," replied Robert. "The medical folk tell me that my last and only chance is bathing and sea air and riding. With my promotion and the increase of salary it brings, I can now obey their mandates," and he held the paper to his breast with a sigh of relief.

"Then the sooner you start, the better," remarked the Duke kindly.

Lady Nancy rose to her feet with a wan smile on her lips. "And the sooner we start for Dumfries, father, the better," she returned.

"You're right, child, we must hasten," and he hastily arose and got his hat and cane together, then he turned once more to Robert. "Mr. Burns, pardon the suggestion, but is it not time to get



out another volume of your poems?" he asked kindly.

"I have not in my present state of mind much appetite for exertion in writing," answered Robert slowly.

"But they could be arranged for you by some literary friend," quickly returned the Duke, "and advertised to be published by subscription."

Robert raised his head proudly. "Subscription!" he repeated. "No, no, that savors too much of charity," and a look of obstinacy came into his darkened eyes.

"Remember," said Lady Nancy gently, "that Pope published his Iliad by subscription, Mr. Burns."

He remained silent a moment, then after a little struggle with his obstinate pride, he answered with a touch of bitterness in his voice, "I realize that I am in no position to despise any means to add to my income or to leave my family better provided for after I am gone. I will take your advice and will at once speak to my dear friend Aiken about it. He will aid me."

The door opened and Jean entered the room. She had heard all the good news, and having met both the Duke and Lady Nancy while sojourning at Glencairn Castle a few years before, she felt she ought to thank them for their good offices in Robert's behalf.

Lady Nancy and the Duke greeted her warmly,



asked after the health of the children, expressed pleasure in seeing her again, and soon put her at her ease, for the sudden thought of her hasty marriage to Robert and the attendant slanderous gossip at first made her feel and appear self-conscious and restrained.

“I was just telling Robert,” said the old Duke, “that he must go at once to the seashore.” She looked at her husband, and her wistful expression did not escape the keen eyes of Lady Nancy.

“If he only could go at once,” faltered Jean, “I am sure the water would effect a cure, but——”

Nancy gave her father a significant look, which clearly said, “They have no money, father.” At least, so he interpreted it, aided by his own shrewd guess at the state of affairs.

“By the way, Robert,” he said jocularly, “can you swallow your pride sufficiently to accept a month’s salary in advance?” He pulled out a large, well-filled wallet and opened it.

“We do not need it, my lord,” answered Robert firmly and a trifle coldly. “I am expecting——” Here Jean hurriedly interrupted him, knowing what he was about to say.

“Oh, Robert!” she cried contritely, “I forget to tell you that the Posty left no letter.”

“No letter!” he repeated dully, looking at her with wide-open, searching eyes. She sadly shook her head.



"Here are £5, lad. Take the note and to-morrow set out for Brow," and the Duke held out the note for his acceptance, but he sat with averted gaze in the proud silence of keen disappointment.

"Do not refuse, Robert," pleaded Jean softly. "'Tis only a loan."

Slowly he took the money and folded it between his fingers. "Thank ye, my lord," he said quietly. "I will accept it, for I am in sore need of it at this moment."

"That's right, my lad," he said heartily. "What is a friend for if he cannot extend or receive a favor?" and he turned to help his daughter into her cloak.

Quickly Robert pressed the money into Jean's hand and whispered to her, "Take it at once to Gilbert and bid him hasten to Mossgiel before it is too late to save the roof over mother's head."

"But, Robert——" she protested, but he would not listen to her.

"Do ye not see 'tis near sundown of the second day?" he told her impatiently, "and Gilbert will have to ride fast if he would get to Mossgiel before night overtakes him; noo hasten, Jean." Still she lingered, reluctant to go.

"Oh, lad, this money is for you; it means your health, our happiness. It isn't right to——"

"We have got a roof over our head, Jean," he interrupted sternly. "We maist keep one over my



mother and sister as weel. We will nae starve for our present needs. Noo go, lass, go."

There are only £4 due your father. Keep out one

Thus commanded, she hurried to the chamber where Gilbert sat in despairing solitude, his head held wearily between his hands, and conveyed to him the glad intelligence. And soon he was speeding furiously over the dusty road toward home, his face aglow with joy and eagerness.

When Jean returned to the room she found Souter and Eppy there gayly chatting with the Duke and Lady Nancy, who were evidently much surprised to find their old friend Eppy at last married.

"I am so glad to see you here, Lady Nancy," gushed Eppy effusively. "You must come and see us before you return to Edinburgh. I live on the estate adjoining this farm." He drew the smiling girl to the window and pointed out the beauties of MacDougall House. "He is poor," she whispered, "but he is of noble birth, a MacDougall of Lorne. Souter!" she called aloud to her husband, who was looking exceedingly important as he stood balancing himself on his toes, his hands behind his back, a look of supreme self-satisfaction on his face, and listening, with an air of blasé indifference, to the conversation between the old Duke and Robert. As he heard his name called he leisurely turned his head in his wife's direction.

"Souter," she continued in a tone meant to be



careless, but which expressed plainly her feeling of pride, "isn't it the Marquis of Lorne who is your first cousin?"

"What's that, Souter?" asked Robert incredulously.

Souter looked around him with a sickly smile. He had not thought to be cornered in this manner, when he had filled his wife's mind with stories of past grandeur and noble connections, and it made him feel decidedly uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"Er—didna' ye ken that, Robbie?" he exclaimed with a look of feigned surprise on his reddened face. "Och, yes! By the by, Robbie," he continued quickly, anxious to change the subject, "we came o'er to tell ye that we are gang to Brow on our honeymoon." Here Eppy giggled and looked bashfully out of the window. "An' my wife, Mrs. MacDougall," with a flourish of the hand in her direction, which elicited another giggle from the lady in question, "has decided that we want ye to gang alang wi' us."

Robert looked at him, then at Eppy in speechless surprise. Jean gave a little gasp, and her hand sought her husband's arm and pressed it with delight.

"Souter," faltered Robert, "ye're both doing this out of the kindness of your hearts, but I canna——"

"We'll na take no for an answer. Ye may be



stubborn wi' your lofty independence, your pride, but I can be just as stubborn as ye, Rab Burns, and I say it is settled," said Souter.

"'Tis the hand of God," whispered Jean softly.

"God bless ye both," faltered Robert, grasping Souter's hand affectionately.

"Come, father," said Lady Nancy, who had witnessed this little scene with moist eyes, "I protest we must start on our journey."

"But first we must have a toast," said Robert brightly. "'Tis most fitting. Jean, bring the punch bowl." Quickly she brought from the closet the bowl of Inverary marble and placed it on the table, and into it she poured some hot water and sugar. "We have no wine to offer," continued Robert, "nothing better than Highland whisky, but ye needna' be afraid of becoming intoxicated, my lord," and he smiled ruefully, "for I ken 'twill hardly be tolerable to your educated taste." Jean had mixed the punch and now passed it around among the guests. "For auld lang syne!" cried Robert feelingly. "Is not that phrase most expressive? My lord, a toast," and he raised his glass to the old Duke, who, after a moment's hesitation, proposed "the health of Robert Burns, Scotland's greatest Bard."

"We drink to that with pleasure," exclaimed Lady Nancy.

"Aye, that we do," echoed Souter heartily. And



while the toast was being drunk he slyly whispered, "Rob, dinna' say aught to my wife about—er—the old Marquis, my—ahem—cousin. Ye understand," and he nudged him significantly.

Robert smiled and assured him of his secrecy.

"And noo," said Souter proudly, looking at Eppy's simpering face, "here's to the bride." She made a deep courtesy and quaffed her glass with conscious dignity at her sudden importance. "May she always believe in her husband," he added in an aside to Robert, much to the latter's amusement.

"Mrs. MacDougall, here's to your enemies, your foes," proposed Robert.

"What?" she cried, opening her eyes in amazement.

"May they have short shoes an' corny toes," he added with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"Duke, a toast!" said Souter importantly.

The Duke thought a moment. "Well, I drink to Mrs. MacDougall. May she soon have a house full of bairns," he thoughtlessly proposed.

Eppy gasped and turned crimson, and Lady Nancy bit her lips to keep back the smile her father's well-meant but tactless speech occasioned.

"Do you mean to insult me, my lord?" flashed Eppy indignantly.

"Bless my soul, no," returned the Duke in astonishment, who could see no reason for offense in his kindly-meant remark.



"The Duke meant well," said Souter pacifically to his wife, whose eyes were flashing angrily. "An'—an'—stranger things might happen, ye ken," and he rubbed his chin reflectively with a sly look out of the corner of his roguish eye at Robert. She tossed her head haughtily.

"'Twould not be so monstrous strange, Mr. MacDougall, as you seem to think," she retorted frigidly. Souter opened his eyes in speechless surprise. He was about to speak, but after one bewildered glance at the disdainful face of his bride, concluded that discretion was the better part of valor, and for the rest of that day he remained in thoughtful silence reflecting on the inconsistencies of woman kind in particular, and speculating upon the strange and mysterious workings of human nature in general.

The Duke bade them all adieu and passed out into the garden, where its wild beauties attracted his eye. He wandered about, forgetting, in his admiration for the flowers, his daughter, who had lingered behind for one last farewell word—alone.

"And so, Mr. Burns," she said thoughtfully, looking after Jean's retreating figure, "you have never regretted taking the step that bound your life to that of Jean Armour's? Regretted doing your duty?" There was a note of regret in the vibrating voice.

"Never, my lady," he replied firmly. "It was



the only really good thing I have ever done in my wretched life."

She looked at him a moment with hungry eyes. "Do you never think of the old days in town?" she asked suddenly, and she was greatly surprised to see his face turn pale, his eyes flash and deepen.

"For God's sake, madam, do not mention the past!" he said, turning away. "All that has passed out of my life forever," he murmured after a pause, "never to return."

"And you wish it so?" she asked faintly. He bowed his head slowly. She moistened her lips feverishly and drew near to him, her eyes filled with a light that would have startled him had he seen it. "Say not so! Must I give up the friendship of the only man I esteem and hold dear?" she panted breathlessly. "Oh, will you not renew the broken thread of our correspondence [he had written her several times since coming to Ellisland, but before Jean's advent] and enjoy the sweet intercourse of thought, which will bring such gladness into my own life, and will brighten the gloom of your own, and will take naught from your wife's peace of mind?"

He raised his head and regarded her thoughtfully. "How can ye ask me that, my lady," he answered, "when ye declared to me in your last letter that you meant to preserve my epistles with a view, sooner or later, to expose them to the pillory of derision and



the rocks of criticism?" And a look of resentment gleamed in his eyes.

"I protest, Mr. Burns," she cried reproachfully. "I have, indeed, preserved your letters, but they will never leave my possession; they are cherished as the dearest treasures of my life."

He sighed and remained silent for a space. From the kitchen came the sound of children's voices. He listened to it a moment, then turned to Lady Nancy, a look of resolution in his face.

"Lady Nancy," he said firmly, "I canna' write to ye in sincerity. I have a wife and family, an' I have given my word to Jean, and while I dare to sin, I dare not to lie, else madam I could perhaps too truly join grief with grief, and echo sighs to thine. But with one foot in the grave, I have no desire to stir up the old ashes of—friendship to find a living ember. 'Twould be but a weak, fitful burning at best. Nay, 'tis too late noo. Believe me, 'tis best, dear lady." He rose to his feet and held out his hand again. "An' noo farewell, Lady Nancy, farewell."

She took his hand and looked into his set, unmoved face, and a sigh of utter disappointment, of patient longing, involuntarily escaped her trembling lips. "If it must be, then farewell," she answered slowly, a slight tremor in her soft voice. She walked to the door, then turned and fixing her eyes on him, she continued mournfully, "Do not quite forget me, will you, Robert? Let the scenes of nature remind you



of Nancy. In winter remember the dark shades of her life, for there are plenty; in summer, the warmth of her friendship; in autumn, her glowing wishes to bestow plenty on all, and let spring animate you with hopes that your absent friend may yet surmount the wintry blasts of life, and revive to taste a spring-time of happiness."

He bowed his head gravely. "I shall remember ye, Lady Nancy—friend," he returned feelingly.

She gave him one long, lingering look. "Farewell, farewell!" she gasped, and when he raised his head she was gone.

He sighed and walked thoughtfully to the window. "The past and all its pleasures will soon be but a dim memory," he muttered grimly, "as one by one the connecting links which bound me to it are severed forever." He paused and watched her as she joined her father in the garden, and a quizzical look flashed across his face. "Faith!" he muttered with a little smile, "who would believe the time would come when lovely women would plead in vain for the favors o' Rob Burns. Och! Robbie, ye are indeed fit only for the grave," and he turned away from the window in earthly meditation.



## CHAPTER XXVI

THE next few days Jean was very busy with her preparations for their sojourn at the seaside. The date of their departure was already fixed and it now lacked but a few days before they would bid farewell to Ellisland forever, for Robert had decided to take up his residence in Dumfries when his visit was ended, for the duties of his new office would necessitate his being there the quarter part of his time.

As the day of their departure drew near, Robert grew more and more depressed, and day by day he sat in melancholy silence beside the window gazing with unseeing eyes upon the tangled yet graceful wilderness of flowers. Jean watched him in growing fear and anxiety as he sank deeper and deeper into those protracted fits of gloom and depression, and vainly sought to find some reason for the sudden change. He had been so elated at getting his promotion and at the many advantageous changes it would make in their condition—had dwelt with affectionate wonder on Eppy's kindness in extending to them the invitation to accompany them to Brow, and had seemed to greatly improve in health and spirits for a few days. Then came Gilbert's letter stating that he had arrived in time to



prevent the eviction of the dear ones at home. The letter had plunged him into a state of feverish excitement and restless anxiety, and all day he would sit at the open window, watching with burning eyes the long narrow road that twisted and turned on its way to Mossgiel, straining his eyes eagerly at the approach of any casual traveler who might be passing, then with a look of patient despair, sink back in his chair, pale and listless, his unfocused eyes again gazing into space. One night after he had left his chair and had retired to his bed for the night, looking more haggard than usual, Jean spied on the floor a crumpled paper which had evidently dropped from his nerveless hand. Picking it up, she smoothed it out and found it to be Gilbert's letter, which she had not seen, as Robert had read it to her and then put it carefully aside. Slowly her gaze wandered over it. Suddenly she gave a great start, for at the bottom of the page this sentence caught her eye: "Mary leaves to-morrow for the Highlands and will pass through Ellisland." Thoughtfully she put the letter on the chair where he could find it in the morning, and sat down by the cradle of the bairn and gently rocked him till his fretful crying ceased; then she gave herself up to the heart-burning thoughts that filled her mind. She had tried so hard to be patient all these years, she had struggled and struggled to do her duty without a word of complaint, she thought, while bitter tears of patient grief and



secret yearning for the love that she knew belonged to another rolled down her sorrowing cheek. She had no word of complaint to make against Robert though, for he had never sought to deceive her once, and there was no feeling of resentment in her heart against the little dairymaid. It was not the child's fault. It was not the fault of either that they still loved each other. Only Robert might have shown her the letter, she thought with quivering lips; there was no need to keep it from her. She would know it when Mary came to the house, anyway. She might have guessed the reason for his sudden change, she thought, wiping away her tears, only her mind had been so filled with the household preparations for moving that Mary had been quite forgotten. For a while she gently rocked the sleeping child, watching its sweet, flushed face, listening to its soft breathing, and soon all disturbing thoughts slipped away from her troubled mind, and a peaceful, holy calm entered her patient heart and shone through her love-lit eyes. Covering its little form carefully, she carried the cradle into her chamber and placed it within reach of her bed. Then as she disrobed for the night in dreary silence, her eyes fixed on the pale face of her husband, who was tossing and muttering in his sleep, a tender wave of pity swept over her at the thought of the sweet lass who would shortly pass out of their lives forever, leaving only a sweet, haunting memory behind to remind them of



her pathetic young life. Quickly she slipped into bed beside her restless husband, upon whose feverish cheek she pressed a tender kiss, and closing her tired eyes, fancied she slept, though her sleep was but a waking dream of love for her husband and children, in which all bright hopes and vague longings reached their utmost fulfillment, and yet were in some strange way crossed with shadows of sorrow and grief, which she had no power to disperse.

On the following morning the heat was intense. No breath of air stirred a ripple on the sluggishly-flowing Nith, and there was a heaviness in the atmosphere which made the very brightness of the sky oppressive. Such hot weather was unusual for that part of Scotland, and, according to Souter Johnny, betokened some change. The sun was dazzling, yet there was a mist in the air as though the heavens were full of unshed tears. A bank of nearly motionless clouds hung behind the dark, sharp peaks of the distant mountains which lay beyond Mossgiel, for there was no wind stirring, and Robert, seated in his chair by the window, found himself too warm with his thick plaid wrapped closely around him, and throwing it back he let the sunshine bathe him in its golden glow and play on the uncovered ebony of his hair. He no longer watched the road with such eager intensity. Rarely this morning had his gaze wandered beyond the bush beneath the window, with its one snowy-white rose, the last rose of summer, nes-



ting among the faded, worm-eaten leaves, looking so pure, so fragrant, so delicately white against the background of rusty, dead-looking foliage. It had blossomed in the night, and in the morning when he had approached the lattice from force of habit, although he had given up all hope of seeing Mary before she left Ayrshire, he had spied it in all its delicate beauty. Each morning for six days now he had gone to that window, expecting before the day drew to its close to see the beloved form of his Mary approach, only to go to his bed at night in bitter disappointment. Gilbert's letter stated she would start that day, and now the sixth day had come and yet there was no sign of her. He had told himself he would not watch the road this morning; there was no use, she had gone; she had not wanted to see him; she felt too bitter against him—it was only natural she should. These bitter thoughts had filled his mind with misery and wretchedness as he drew near the open window. Suddenly his eyes had rested on the spot of white nestling on the top of the bush. With a strange thrill at his heart, he had knelt down beside the latticed window, and folding his arms on the sill, gazed at the message from heaven, sent to bring peace and hope to his aching heart, so he fondly believed, while bright tears filled his eyes and brimmed over, falling warmly on his folded hands.

“Oh, Mary, my love, my love!” he whispered brokenly. “Come to me before ye die.” And all



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that morning he had watched it expand and stretch out its petals to its utmost, wafting its perfume up into his grateful nostrils, till a peace such as had not visited his heart for many years, smoothed out the lines of suffering from his brow and softened the hard light in his deepened eyes. A verse of a poem he had written a few years before flashed across his memory:

“Oft hae I roved by bonnie Doon,  
To see the rose and woodbine twine;  
And like a bird sang o’ its luve,  
And fondly sae did I o’ mine;  
Wi’ lightsome heart I pu’d a rose,  
Fu’ sweet upon its thorny tree;  
But my fausse luvver stole my rose,  
But ah! he left the thorn wi’ me.”

Jean, coming into the room a little later, found him there, his head resting on his hands, a smile of contented calm upon his face, which now seemed like the face of the youth she had known in Mauchline, and the sight thrilled her strangely and brought a spasm of pain to her overcharged heart.



## CHAPTER XXVII

THAT morning, when Robert first caught sight of the rose, he had experienced a sort of mental obsession in which his brain was mastered by the thought—an absurd idea perhaps, and one which his reason and his will both might easily have repelled, only he clung fondly to the belief, letting it fasten itself upon his mind and grow and grow—that Mary had passed away in the night, and that her spirit had found a temporary resting place in the heart of the white rose that had blossomed forth so unexpectedly, so unseasonably. He had watched the nodding flower on its long, slender stem of green, waving gracefully in the light breeze that had sprung up, and in his state of dreaming consciousness fancied he could see the wistful face of Highland Mary peeping out from among the snowy petals. As the feeling grew upon him that she had come to him in spirit, a great content settled down and around him, a mighty calm that seemed to still the troubled waters of his soul, and all the bitter discontent, the yearnings of his heart, the cravings, the unrest, faded away like a mist dissolved by the warm splendor of the sun. For a while he had sat there in blissful peace, a smile of ineffable rapture on his face, gazing with rapt adoring eyes at the dancing rose, which seductively blew



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nearer and nearer to him with each gust of the swiftly rising wind, then as he would lovingly stretch out his hand to touch it, to caress it, away it would go, eluding him like a dancing sunbeam, to the farthest side of the bush, bending its saucy head lower and lower till it was lost to sight for an instant, then up it would bound, gayly nodding, and then for a moment would pause in its restless elfin dance, quivering on its stem as though tired with its sportive play, its coquetry. The sky had grown gradually darker, and little waves disturbed the smooth surface of the greenish gray grass that swayed and undulated in running billows, as the wind rose. But the kneeling man was all unconscious of the gloom that had settled over the landscape, shutting out the glorious sunshine, stilling the song of the birds, and bringing in its train a damp chill that presaged a storm. The wind tossed the curls madly about the face of the poet, but still he did not move; only as the chill air struck through his thin shirt, he mechanically pulled his plaid about his shoulders, and dreamed on happily, of the old days, when the heart was young, before sorrow had embittered his life, dreamed of a life of love with Mary by his side, dreamed and dreamed far into the morning, and so Jean had found him and left him to his slumbers. Suddenly his eyes opened, but he did not move. He sat there feeling a little cramped and stiff, until hazy recollections dawned slowly upon his mind,



then he raised himself from his crouching position, and leaning out of the window gazed with eyes that were wonderfully luminous at the blossom which was just beyond his eager reach. He inhaled deep breaths of its fragrant perfume, a smile of loving tenderness on his lips. All at once a feeling of sudden depression tightened around his heart as he noticed for the first time the deepening gloom without, felt the lowering temperature of the atmosphere, which chilled and depressed him so strangely. He looked again at the swiftly dancing flower, and his heart stopped beating for an instant, while a look of pain, of heart-breaking sorrow, darkened his face—the white petals were dropping one by one, and were being whirled and tossed madly through the air like flakes of snow. He watched in silence, as the wind, with reckless abandon, tore them out and scattered them here and there, some sailing merrily out of sight—one dashing through the open window and against the white, agonized face of the suffering man, clinging to it for a moment, in a sweet caress, a last embrace, then slipping down—down, till it found rest on the floor, where soon it was dead and forgotten. As the last snowy petal left its stem, leaving it looking so bare and pitiful nestling in among the leaves as though ashamed of its nakedness, a hard sob of anguish escaped his lips, for it seemed as if each petal contained a part of the soul of his loved one, and leaning his face against the sash, he



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gave himself up to the crushing sorrow that submerged his soul and plunged him once more into black despair. It seemed as if the last link that had bound her to earth, and to him, was at last broken and she had passed on out of his life forever; not even the rose was left to preserve as a sacred memory to look at occasionally, to bring her presence nearer. And now no more such roses would bloom for him, not in this life anyway, and so he drearily mused in hopeless sorrow.

All at once a vague feeling of uneasiness stole over him, a curious feeling that he was not alone; and yet he did not look around, for somehow it seemed that it was the spirit of his Mary still hovering in the air, seeking to comfort his grieving heart; and yet the strange feeling of her nearness was different from that emotion he had experienced when he in fancy had looked at her wistful face in the heart of the nodding rose. And suddenly he held his breath as the consciousness of her physical presence grew stronger and stronger upon him; his startled eyes fixed themselves upon the naked stem, swaying gently on the bush—he strained his ears to hear—he knew not what—he could not tell—a trembling seized his limbs—and when he heard a sweet, low voice call “Robert,” not from the slender stalk, but somewhere behind him, he gave no start of surprise. He told himself it—it—was only imagination—the great longing within him had—but there it was again—it



could not be fancy—it—it must be—he turned slowly in the direction of the voice as if afraid to find naught but the empty room to mock him, for he had heard no sound to indicate a presence within the room. As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom and his dulled vision cleared, he saw just inside the door, standing with hands outstretched to him—a flesh and blood reality, but oh! so pitifully changed. He gave a gasping cry and sprang to clasp the swaying form close to his throbbing breast.

Ah! the rapture of that meeting, the blissful joy which filled his aching heart and crowded out stern recollections from his memory, while all thoughts of the grim present, its bitter facts which faced him, the vain regrets, all—all were now forgotten. The lines of pain in his haggard face were smoothed out gently and deep peace settled upon their troubled souls.

“Ah, Mary!” he breathed softly, breaking the sacred stillness. “Ye have come at last. Oh, it has been so long, dearie, so long, and I have wanted ye so much,” and he held her to his heart in a strong, jealous, passionate embrace, as if he could never part with her again on earth, but would shield her from even the shadow of death, that he saw stamped on her pale, pinched features, and which glowed in the haunting depths of her tired blue eyes. A smile of sadness passed quickly over her face like the sun that peeps through the sudden rift of a cloud.



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“Ye knew, laddie, I couldna’ go awa’ without seeing ye just once mair,” she whispered tenderly. A fit of coughing suddenly racked her slender frame. He led her weak and trembling to a chair and gently wiped away the beads of perspiration from her forehead, and for a moment she leaned up against him in utter exhaustion. Presently she smiled up in his anxious face and faintly thanked him. “Dinna’ be alarmed, dearie,” she faltered. “I’m aright noo,” and she bravely straightened up in her seat, but he would not release her altogether.

And so they sat, sad and silent, knowing the parting, the sad, final parting would come in a few quickly-fleeing moments.

Outside the clouds had been gathering thickly over the sky, and now and then a few shafts of sunlight still forced a passage through them with steady persistency, although storm hovered over all, waiting the signal to burst forth. Suddenly a silver glare of lightning sprang out from beneath the black-winged cloud hanging low in the horizon, and a few large drops of rain began to fall. Mary nestled closer to him as she saw the brilliant flash, and shivered apprehensively. They both were thinking of that other storm, when he had bidden farewell to Ayrshire in poverty and despair, to take his place in Edinburgh among the high and mighty, to claim the reward of genius—honor, fame and renown. And now the time had come for her to say farewell, only there



was a difference, and such a difference! She was bidding good-by to life, to love, to everything. A happy smile broke over her wistful face as she thought of her reward; it would not be such a fleeting thing as riches, honor and fame. Thank God, it was more than those; it was an eternity of happiness. No more sorrow, no more suffering, only peace, divine peace, such as the world knoweth not, such as she had never known in her short, eventful life.

“And so, Mary,” murmured Robert brokenly, “the end of our life’s romance has come at last.”

She put her little hand in his and pressed it warmly.

“Yes, ’tis the end, Robin Adair. The end of all, but it had to come some time; we were but wearing our hearts out in vain longings, in bitter regrets, ye ken that, dear.” She paused and idly watched the rain, which was now coming down fiercely. “It will be better for—for us—all when I am gone,” she murmured presently, with a far-away look in her eyes.

A sob of anguish caused her to turn quickly to the sorrowing man by her side. Putting her hand on his head, she continued in pathetic resignation, “I will be spared much pain and sorrow, ye ken, so dinna greet for me, laddie. I—I am content, nay glad to go, for I—I am so tired—so very tired of this—long, unhappy struggle.” Her voice



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trembled and the tears rolled slowly down her sad cheeks.

“If I, too, could only end it all,” he moaned.

“Sh! laddie!” she answered in gentle reproach. “Ye mustna’ wish for death; ye have those dependent on ye, whom ye maun think of noo, Jean and the bairns.” Her voice grew very sweet and caressing. “I saw them as I came in. Oh, they are such bonnie little lads, dearie. So like ye, too. Gilbert is o’er fond of them; he is playing wi’ them noo.”

Mrs. Dunlop had been taken ill at the last moment and had commissioned Gilbert to take her place. She had supplied him plentifully with money for the journey and had then sorrowfully taken her departure for Edinburgh, her kind old heart sad and heavy.

“Robbie lad,” continued Mary earnestly, “ye—ye maun take Jean close to your heart. Ye maun love her fondly for the bairns’ sake and—for her own, too, for she is a good, kind wife to ye, and ye’ll all—be very happy yet, I ken weel.”

He slipped down from his chair to his knees and buried his tear-stained face in her lap. “When ye go, Mary,” he murmured brokenly, “I’ll never know peace and happiness again.” She let him weep on in silence. Presently he raised his head and looked at her. “Ye dinna’ ken, lassie, how I have hungered for a sight of your dear face—a word from your sweet lips, this last year.” He clung to her passionately. “An’ noo in a few minutes,” he continued



in anguish, "ye will pass out o' my life forever and I maun live on here—desolate—and heart-broken."

"Nay, nay!" she cried reproachfully. "Dinna' say that, laddie, not alone, not alone," and she looked compassionately at the door of the kitchen where Jean sat in patient misery holding her bairn to her aching heart. At that moment Gilbert softly opened the door and told them that they would have to start at once, that the storm would not let up and that they must catch the boat at Greenock that night.

"Ye had better say good-by, noo," and he closed the door quietly behind him.

They looked at each other, too dazed for words. Then she started to rise to her feet, but he clasped her hands tightly, though she did not feel the pain, and pressed her into the seat again.

"Not yet, not yet, Mary!" he gasped. "I canna' let ye go just yet. 'Tis like tearing my heart out by its roots."

"Ye mustna' greet so, laddie," said Mary, frightened by the vehemence of his sorrow.

"'Tis all my fault," he moaned, "all thro' my sinful weakness that ye are made to suffer noo, all my fault."

She put her fingers on his lips. "Sh! dearie!" she remonstrated softly. "Dinna' blame yoursel'. If we suffer noo, we must na' forget how happy we have been, and we were happy, weren't we, laddie?"



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and she smiled in fond reminiscence, then continued a trifle unsteadily, "An—an hour's happiness is worth a year of pain, for when we get sad an' lonely, we can live it all over again, canna' we?" She paused and sighed pathetically. "Only it—it isna' real, is it, laddie?" A sudden break in her voice caused her to put her hand to her throat and look away with quivering lips. Then she went on in plaintive, pleading gentleness, "Ye will sometimes think of me—way up—in the Highlands, won't ye, dearie? It willna' wrong—Jean, for—soon your Mary will be—in Heaven, in her castle grand."

The thunder rolled along the sky in angry reverberating echoes, stilling the low voice, while frequent flashes of lightning leaped out like knives suddenly drawn from dark sheaths—yet toward the north over Greenock the sky was clearing, and streaks and beams of gold fell from the hidden sun, with a soothing promise of a clear and radiant sunset. Mary's face brightened as she watched the sunbeams struggling through the lightened clouds, and she went on dreamily, in the prolonged lull of the storm:

"My home there will be so fine, much finer than the castle in Edinburgh." She smiled tenderly and let her hand slip down from his head to his heaving shoulder, where it rested in loving quiet. "How happy I was that night," she mused; "an' the sweet gown was so pretty I—hated to take it off, but it



wasna' mine." She paused with quivering lips. "But—but—I was going to buy one the next day for my own, wasna' I? A white one—all smooth and soft and shiny—for—for my wedding gown." Her voice died away in a hushed, mournful quaver.

"Don't, don't, Mary!" sobbed Robert unrestrainedly. "I canna' bear to think of that noo, noo when I maun give ye up forever." He stroked her face and covered her pale, thin, toil-worn hands with heart-breaking kisses. Presently he grew calmer. "I shall never forget that night, Mary, that night with its pleasures and pain," he went on with dreamy pathos. "It is ever in my thoughts; e'en in my dreams your dear bonnie face haunts me with its sweet, pathetic smile, and your tender lips seem to say, 'laddie, ye were not true to your vows, ye have broken my heart.'" She gave a little cry of pain.

"No, no, laddie, I never thought that," she cried, and she looked at him with gentle, pitying eyes.

"I wad try to speak, to implore your forgiveness for the misery I had caused ye," continued Robert, his husky voice heard faintly above the wail of the wind, which shook the lattice with a sort of stealthy clatter, like a midnight prowler striving to creep in to steal and plunder. "And in my dumb despair and anguish I would clutch at your floating garments only to have them vanish into air, and I would awake to find myself—alone—with my bitter re-



morse and sorrow." A low, choked sob broke from his hollow breast—he covered his face with his hands. "Can ye ever forgive me?" he murmured.

Mary regarded him with infinite compassion, a heroic smile on her tired, quivering lips. "Freely do I forgive everything, laddie," she replied, "an' when I am gone I want ye to remember always that Mary Campbell had only love, pity and forgiveness in her heart for ye." She raised her trembling hands solemnly. "May God bring peace to your troubled heart, laddie, and may your future dreams be filled with joy and happiness, of love and prosperity."

The door opened and Jean quietly entered the room, her tense, white face full of patient sorrow. She had sat in the kitchen for an eternity it seemed to the waiting woman, while Mary was taking her farewell of her husband. She had tried to talk to Gilbert, to interest herself in the news of home, but the words simply refused to leave her lips, and so she had sat there, listlessly watching the children playing around their uncle's knee, her ears straining to hear some sound from the other room. No one knew how she suffered, to step aside, to welcome to her home his former sweetheart, to know they were there clasped in each other's arms; and yet she did not feel bitter toward Mary somehow, strange as it might seem. She pitied her, she pitied them both, and it filled her with a strange feeling of surprise





“The door opened and Jean quietly entered the room.”







that she could feel so. Still loving Robert as fondly as she did, she could not help the feeling of despair which crept over her at times, to know, to fully realize, that she held only a secondary place in his affections, to hear him calling for another, for Mary. Sometimes in thought she caught herself bitterly arraigning him for his thoughtlessness, his apparent heartlessness; then the thought of his weak condition, his ill health, his distracted state of mind, these past months, tempered her judgment. He was hardly responsible for his actions, and if he were conscious of his own selfishness he had lost the power, the strength of will, to restrain his feverish impulses. She wondered vaguely if it would be different when—when she had passed away forever—if her memory would still come between them. She hoped not—she prayed that it might not be so.

Gilbert had left her to her silent musings, and had gone out to harness the horses. Returning, he told her that they must start at once, so she had opened the door to tell them, and as her eyes took in the misery which was reflected in their white, drawn faces she was moved to intense pity, and the tears rained slowly down her cheeks.

“Come, Mary, Gilbert says ’tis time to start,” she faltered. They both looked up slowly at the sound of her voice, then gazed dully into each other’s eyes. Presently Mary rose from her chair and stood up unsteadily, stretching out her little, cold, white



hands to Robert, who clutched them in his own feverish palms as a drowning man clutches a straw.

"The time has come to part, laddie," she said bravely, a wan little smile on her bluish lips.

A violent shuddering seized him, he did not move for a moment. Finally he staggered to his feet, and a quiver of agony passed over his face. He looked at her with dulled, glazed eyes and his face assumed a ghastly hue.

"'Tis so hard, so cruel, to say good-by forever," he breathed huskily, for his throat was dry and parched. His swaying figure tottered a moment, then he drew her slowly into his arms and pressed his lips to her forehead. "'Tis the last time on earth, Mary," he whispered brokenly. Her lips trembled, but she would not give way to the feeling of dizziness that threatened to rob her of her consciousness. She must leave him with a smile, she told herself; she must not make it harder for him. "Yes, for the last time, Robert," she repeated slowly. "May God bless and watch over ye, Robin Adair—till—we—meet in Heaven. Good-by." Her voice died away inarticulately, and she sank forward into his arms, where she lay motionless with closed eyes, utterly spent in body and spirit, and save for a shivering sob that now and then escaped her, she seemed almost insensible. Jean rushed quickly forward and drew her into a chair, while Gilbert fetched a glass of water, which he held to her white lips.



The wind shook the doors and whistled shrilly through the crevices, then as though tired of its own wrath, surged away in hoarse murmurs, through the branches of the creaking old beech, toward the Loch, and there was a short, tense silence while they waited to see signs of life appear in the face of the stricken girl. Presently she opened those azure blue eyes and smiled up in their anxious faces; then she struggled to her feet, but she put her hand quickly to her heart and tottered.

“Oh, my—poor—weak heart,” she gasped faintly. Jean caught her quickly in her strong arms and stroked her soft cheek with a curious yearning sensation of love tugging at her heartstrings.

“Poor dear,” she said compassionately, “you’re too weak to stand so much excitement,” and she put her back firmly in the chair. Mary attempted to rise again, but Jean would not permit her. “Gilbert shall carry you to the carriage,” she told her. Gilbert stepped to her side.

“I will be a light burden noo, Gilbert,” she faltered, smiling pathetically into his strong, rugged face, which bore traces of his deep, bitter grief. Jean gently put her arms about her and in silence implanted a kiss on her pure, sweet face; then she turned away and covered her face with her hands. Gilbert bent over and picked up the frail body, and in spite of his efforts to restrain his emotion, a sigh that was almost a groan escaped him, for she was



no heavier than a child of a few summers. He carried her past his brother, who was sitting with head bowed upon his breast in an attitude of absolute despair.

“Greet not for me, dearie,” whispered Mary faintly, stretching out her hand and letting it rest tenderly on his head. “God’s—will—be—done,” and her dry, burning eyes took their last look, and said their last farewell as Gilbert slowly carried her from the room and closed the door, shutting Robert out from her lingering gaze.



## CHAPTER XXVIII

Then whilst his throbbing veins beat high  
With every impulse of delight,  
Dash from his lips the cup of joy,  
And shroud the scene in shades of night;  
And let despair, with wizard light,  
Disclose the yawning gulf below,  
And pour incessant on his sight,  
Her spectred ills and shapes of woe.

For some moments Robert sat there, apparently dead to his surroundings. He had not looked up or moved as the door closed upon the retreating figures. He seemed to be in a state of complete exhaustion of mind and body. Presently the sound of the carriage rolling over the swishing, muddy driveway roused him from his lethargy. Raising his head he looked wildly around the room—then paused and listened—he was as one in a dream, realizing nothing plainly. He could hardly remember what had taken place during the past few minutes; he could grasp nothing tangible in thought or memory, till with a wild start he seemed to awake, as the rattle of the passing wheels brought back recollection. He staggered to the window and, throwing back the lattice, gazed out at the rapidly retreating blur of moving wheels and horses and shapeless figures, and watched it till it was lost to sight. As he stood there a soft



change, a delicate transparency, swept over the dark bosom of the sky. Pale pink streaks glittered on the dusky horizon—darts of light began to climb upward into the clouds, and to plunge downward upon the waving field of hay; the radiance spread swiftly, till suddenly the whole heavens were bathed in the glorious light, and the last cloud, fading into nothingness, revealed the sun in all its matchless glory, hanging low in the sky just above the hills, behind which it would soon drop in stately splendor. Slowly the watcher sank down to his knees and leaned his tired head against the sash, his eyes closed and sunken.

“She is gone, gone,” he murmured brokenly, “an’ I am left all alone noo, all alone.” Jean bent over him with pathetic tenderness, and taking his limp hand in her own warm palm, she said with timid reproach:

“Not alone, Robert, while you have your—bairns—and me.” She feared to call his attention to herself in the midst of his grief, lest he might revile her for standing between him and happiness; but he did not hear.

“Oh, Jean, how can I take up the burden of life again?” he cried weakly, clinging to her hand with despairing strength. It thrilled her strangely to feel the grasp of his hand, to feel his weakness, his sudden dependence, the appeal in his dark, mournful eyes raised to hers so pitifully; she knelt beside him and drew his head down on her heaving bosom.



"Ye must be brave," she told him, her voice trembling with a new-found happiness, a sudden joy. He needed her now, needed her love and care more than ever. Then she continued softly, her voice vibrating with thrilling intensity, "Ye have much to live for yet, lad. Ye must be strong, ye must be brave. Pluck up your courage! I'll help ye."

He looked at her wonderingly, then he slowly bowed his head. "Yes, Jean," he said humbly, "I will be strong; I'll try to be brave."

She helped him to his chamber, and placed him beside the window, where he could no longer watch the road, and left him. For a while he gazed out over the fields in apathetic calm, his mind a blank. Across the field he could see Souter Johnny at work in his garden. Suddenly he straightened up and listened. Souter was singing.

"O where, an' O where is my Highland laddie gone?"

came the old cracked voice. He closed his eyes wearily, but he could not shut out the sound.

"Oh, Mary, my lost Highland Mary," he whispered under his breath.

THE END







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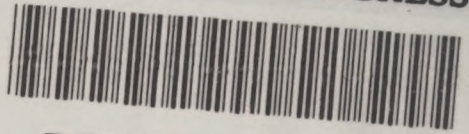
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